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A Romance of the Buffalo Range.

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LIGHTFOOT," "PISTOL JOHNNY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE HIDE-HUNTERS AT HOME.

A SHRILL, unearthly scream rent the air, blending with the sharp report of a rifle, the explosion being repeated with a barely perceptible pause. The two shots echoed through the adjacent hills like a prolonged echo, instead of being separate and distinct from each other.

From a shallow, grass-grown "draw" or *coulee* that ran from the bank of the stream out into the level plain bordering the foothills, two animals leaped, one for life, the other for his dinner.

SPREAD EAGLE SAM STARED IN OPEN-MOUTHED AMAZEMENT AT THE SCENE.

Spread Eagle Sam.

Startled from its grassy form by the leap of a coyote, dingy, dirty, disreputable-looking as is the wont of its kind, a sleek, well-muscled jack-rabbit cleared the *coulee* with one tremendous leap, its ebon-tipped ears shooting upright with a ludicrous flirt as it half-turned its head to learn for certain what evil power had disturbed its noonday siesta. And with an angry, snarling yell, the coyote made one more attempt to secure its prey.

Better have suffered disappointment in silence, since an empty stomach is surely better than a perforated one.

A pair of flashing blue eyes glanced in that direction; a magnificent form sprung erect, handling a heavy gun as though it were but a feather's weight, and that wild, peculiar yell rent the air even as the weapon exploded. And, struck on the shoulder by the humming lead as he rose for a second leap, the coyote was almost literally split open by the quartering lead.

Swift as thought itself the smoking brown tube was turned upon the "prairie mule," now splitting the air as only a full grown "jack" can, stretched out into a long streak of dingy gray, that would have covered near a score yards had the tremendous leap been uninterrupted. But at the crack, the hare vanished, leaving in its place a whirling rain of wool, flesh and blood.

It was a remarkable "double," and he whose skill had put it on record was by no means inclined to let it pass unnoticed.

Carefully leaning the rifle against the front of the rude cabin, he leaped high into the air, flapping his arms and splitting the air with that unearthly screech, which no combination of letters can fitly express.

"Who says poor bull, when I says fat pullet? Whar's the feller as thinks he kin make twins with a two-eyed gun? Show him up to the king-pin as fu'st'vented trigger-pullin', an' run a ramrod up his clo'es so his backbone won't melt when he tries to gaze onto Spread Eagle Sam, the dandiest high-flyer 'twixt this an' the year 10,000!"

Another high leap, during which the arms flapped and the heels rattled together, while the capacious lungs sent the air out in a screech that for force and volume would not have disgraced a steam-whistle. Then alighting, Spread Eagle Sam turned toward a young man who stood near, saying heartily:

"It's a daisy shooter, Jes', an' she matches my han', eye an' finger to a t-y-t-y; but I hain't got no furder use fer her when it comes down to business. In the common run o' han's, mebbe she'd answer with them darned turn-outside-in-an-splatter bullets, but not with the ole man. No, sir! Git my narves strung up—git my ole heart to pumpin' blood a ton a secont an' pushin' on the heel a mile a minnit—while this eagle eye o' mine crams 'lectricity into the starn o' each blue hummer, a solid quart to the inch—what would 'come o' the game, an' whar would the profits be?"

"But if one bullet can be made to do the work of two?"

"It cain't, Jes': not in judgmatrical han's. You cain't kill even a tough bull twicet over."

"But with an express load and bullet you can drop him in his tracks, even if you miss what would be a vital point, with a common solid ball."

"An' whar's the use in missin', Jes'? When the ole man tells a bit o' lead to *git thar*, it don't go to squamblin' all over a acre o' land lookin' fer some other place—no! It jes' says the ole man knows what he wants, an' bet your ole boots it'll *git thar*, ef the trip takes a week hard travelin'. That's the Ole Reliable, every time!" and Spread Eagle Sam lovingly patted the "cheek" of his well-worn Sharpe.

A curious blending of whine, snarl, sneeze and cursing, at that moment, caused the two men to turn toward the rude hut, just as a miserable-looking creature came stumbling through the opening in the front, thrusting aside the wrinkled hide that did service as a door.

"Durn sech a country, an' double-durn sech a chimley!" the nondescript howled, digging a pair of grimy fists into as many smoke-blackened eyes. "How kin a man cook grub when the chimney's turned wrong eend up'ards? When the cussed smoke won't go up an' will come down? When the draft's so powerful the wrong way it keeps suckin' down chunks o' mud all over the vittals? Durn the luck, anyhow! Ef I was on'y back in good ole Mizzouri ag'in—ketch me!"

With a most doleful whine came the last sentence, and the personification of hopeless misery, the old fellow glanced up over the roof of the shanty—to utter a savage yell of rage as he beheld a short, ragged, devil-may-care figure squatting on the top of the mud-and-stone chimney.

"Jes' look at that, will 'e?" he whined, turning toward Spread Eagle Sam and his comrade. "It's a p'izen varmint like that you ax a gentleman to cook fer? A-settin' on the chimley an' me down thar smokin' the two eyes out o' me! Augh! ef I was on'y back in good old Mizzouri ag'in!"

"Is it come to grub that ye're thryin' to git out av that wide slit in a wrinkled hide that ye

call the mouth av ye, Ould Misery?" cried the chimney-imp, with a broad grin on his rosy, comical features. "Swally an' ingyun to swatten the brith av ye, an' thin—will ye luuk at that, now!"

Feeling that this was adding insult to injury, Old Misery snatched up a couple of stones and flung them at his tormentor with such good will that, in striving to avoid them, the Irishman lost his balance and came tumbling headlong over the roof of the dug-out.

Active as a cat, powerful as dexterous, Spread Eagle Sam leaped forward and caught the falling man in his mighty arms, thus saving him sore bruises, if not broken bones.

"I'll pack more misery in your hide then you'll git out ef you live a year fer every solid inch o' cl'ar fool they is packed in the hide o' ye a'ready!" grated the irate cook, his bony fists sawing the air as he rushed forward, only to be caught by Spread Eagle Sam with one quickly freed hand and held helplessly at arm's length.

"Now quit your be-quittin', won't ye?" he sharply demanded as he shook the two men with as much ease as a gymnast might handle a pair of dumb-bells. "Fu'st ye know I'll be gittin' hot all over. An' when the eagle comes to squeal an' his feathers to brustle up the wrong way, you'll see the fur fly wuss then a snow blizzard—deed you jes' *will*, now—I tell ye!"

"With him a-squattin' on the chimley, an' me made mis'able with the smoke!" whined the cook, collapsing until he hung a limp and seemingly a boneless weight on the giant arm. "Augh! ef I was on'y back in good old Mizzouri ag'in!"

"Will ye listen to *that*, now!" spluttered the Irishman, his face the very picture of injured innocence. "The awful ingratitude that bubbles out av some min like salt wather from the two eyes av a rich man's widdy! An' him ownly the very mornin' that isn't yit cowld in its grave, wishin' that it was a bit o' shmoked ham he had in his fish like that they raised back in ould Misery—where the ownly pork they have is that raised be their neighbors, barrin' the soort that walks on two liggs an' pitches stones at a gentleman! An' me ahmost scoorchin' the sate out av me Soonday trowsiz in the hopes av pl'azin' the doleful joskin! The heel o' me fut to ye, annyhow, Ould Misery—pit that in yer pipe an' smoke it!"

With a subdued groan, Old Misery shrunk from that voluble flood, and as Spread Eagle Sam released him he slunk back to his fireplace. The Patlander, with a comical twist of that side of his face furthest from his giant captor, while the other half expressed only a coaxing gravity, said:

"W'u'd ye mind lindin' me the loan av a chaw tobacky, yer ahur? The taste av that shmode's got clane up to the lips o' me, an' I lift me own plug to home ahn the pianny."

"Thar's a chaw, Johnny Bull, an' with it jes' take this bit o' vice atwixt your teeth: don't rub the ole man too hard ag'in' the fur, or the fu'st you know you won't know no hin' but that you've got a tunnel o' daylight clean through the place you live. When he does riz his ebenezer, he's *p'izen*!"

"Sure it's a blind cat could smell that same widout any sinse av faalin'!" grimed the Patlander, slouching away.

It was near the hour of noon, on a bright, bracing November day. The withered grass, brown and matted, with the scanty foliage remaining on the few trees which marked the hillside and fringed the winding banks of the little stream, told of sharp frosts and biting weather past; but now it was more like a day of the glorious Indian Summer, and all signs seemed to predict a delayed winter.

Mention has been made of a rude cabin, shanty, or "dug-out," as the peculiar structure should more properly be termed, perhaps, though differing materially from the usual model of that characteristic prairie abode.

A deep cut had been made into the foot of a steep hill, facing to the southwest. Inside this cut the framework of a small house had been erected, of small logs, notched and dove-tailed at the ends. The rear of the cabin was composed of the solid earth. There was a lean-to roof, sloping to the front, or away from the hill. The upper ends of the split logs and poles which composed the roof were driven firmly into the hill, then bound together in the middle and lower ends by hide-ropes. Overall were placed buffalo-hides, as yet partially green. In the front an opening had been left for a door, but as yet the space was filled only by a pendent hide, behind which the utterly-disgusted cook had retreated. But as the fun-loving Patlander slouched away in the direction of the creek, Old Misery flung the lower end of the skin over a projecting peg above and to one side of the doorway, thus letting the smoke out and more light into the dingy cabin than could enter at the two small porthole-like windows.

Stowed away in a deep, natural notch in the hillside, not many yards to the left of the dug-out, might have been seen a couple of rough, substantial wagons, covered over with heavy, waterproof canvas and partly-dried hides. These were still packed full of bales, bags, kegs and

other bundles, for the most part just as they had come from the dealer.

Across the narrow cleft in the hill, poles were braced and fastened, covered over with the omnipresent hides so as to perfectly protect the goods beneath. In front were close and high bars, stout enough to resist the assault of a full-grown grizzly bear.

To the right, and further from the dug-out, among the undergrowth and stunted trees fringing the little stream, a substantial corral of small dimensions had been built. At one end was a grass-covered stable where the horses could be sheltered from the driving storms of winter. But now, in full enjoyment of the clear, warm sunshine, playful as colts, the horses were taking what exercise their limited range could afford them, biting and pretending to kick, squealing and whinnying, performing all the antics so dear to spirited, well-fed animals.

Passing under the not overly sweet-smelling hide that temporarily served as a door, we have a dingy, smoky view of the interior and its present occupants, two in number.

Over the rude mud-and-stone fireplace which fills one rear corner of the dug-out, the cook is bending, whining, sniffing, grumbling as he worked, still disgusted with himself and all the world, still bemoaning his unfortunate lot and longing for his far-away home in "good ole Mizzouri."

The rest of the rear wall and the east end of the hut, is given over to narrow bunks, filled with dry "bunch grass," gray blankets and buffalo-hides. In one of these bunks the second occupant of the dug-out is reclining, lazily pulling at a blackened stone pipe, adding to the smoky atmosphere as though it agreed with him.

On the walls hung rifles, saddles, bridles, lariats, spurs, and many other articles which need no more particular mention in this connection, though all were of more or less use to the men who lived there.

Who were those men?

What their business?

Hunters of, and hunted by, men? Outlaws? Fugitives from justice? The scum of civilization, driven hither by the hot breath of offended law?

Not a bit of it!

Wild and rough, uncouth and less than half-civilized as they may appear to the casual observer, these men were fair representatives of their peculiar guild; at one time a wide-spread army whose progress was marked with flowing rivers of blood; a horde that lived by slaughter; close akin to the not more hardy or venturesome trappers of the vanished fur age. Then but a skeleton regiment remaining of the army; now little more than a legend of the past, though one can count the intervening years on the fingers of his hands, without repeating.

The Hide-Hunter of the Buffalo Range!

He had played his part as assigned him under the grand law of the survival of the fittest, and though one must deeply regret the almost extinction of that king of American game, the lordly buffalo, the picture has its brighter side. When the buffalo disappears, Indian savagery will become a thing of the past as well. The red-man will have to handle the hoe and the plow, in place of the bow and rifle. With abundance of bison, the plains Indian needed nothing more; they supplied him with food, shelter and clothing; he might make treaties when the snow began to fly; might draw rations and stock up with weapons and ammunition during the winter at the agencies; but without the buffalo to fall back on, he would not dare take the war-path when the grass began to grow.

Set this down to the credit of the much-be-cursed hide-hunter.

The pastures which supported millions of bison, are now furnishing subsistence for as many cattle. Remember this when you score the name of the hide-hunter with a deep-black mark.

Of those who, less than a decade ago, were best known on the buffalo-ranges, there stands out in broad relief the name of Samuel Ingalls, better known among his fellows by the suggestive sobriquet of "Spread Eagle Sam."

In the very prime of life, he was a man to attract attention no matter in what company one might find him. He was of that boldly handsome type found oftenest in its perfection west of the big rivers; one who "had all outdoors to grow in."

Under the standard, his scalp would brush the six-foot mark, but his remarkable breadth of shoulders, his enormous chest and massive limbs, apparently detracted from his height, unless taken in comparison with some other of known altitude. A giant in bodily strength, he was active and quick motioned, without the slightest suspicion of clumsiness about him.

The exposed portions of his skin were tanned almost to a bronze color, but his hair, worn long and free, his full beard, soft and silken as the hair of a child, falling in slightly waving masses far down his broad bosom, were yellow as the new silk of corn. His frank, honest eyes were of a steel gray, full of life, keen as needles,

seldom at rest, but without aught of furtive shiftiness in them for either friend or foe. His face was strong and bold, without being rugged.

His garb was that of a professional hide-hunter, who has an eye single to business; overalls and jumper of dead-grass colored canvas or ducking. The jacket buttoned close up to his throat. On his head was a hat of the same material, and his yellow hair was the only point of bright color about him.

Jesse Purchass, his present companion, was dressed after the same fashion. In stature he was several inches shorter than his herculean comrade, of comparatively slight build, but with ample muscle for any ordinary emergency.

His hair, eyes and beard were black as midnight; his skin of a healthy olive, slightly tinged with warmly flowing blood.

He, too, was far handsomer in face than the common run of men, though of an exactly opposite type to that of Spread Eagle Sam. He might have been a Spaniard, or an Italian, so far as features went; and like them, a close observer would have set him down as hot-blooded, passionate, swift to anger and quick to strike, easy to take offense and slow to forgive or forget. In short, one who might be an honor to mankind, or a curse to humanity, just as circumstances might shape his life.

Besides Purchass, Spread Eagle Sam had three hunters under his command. There were others belonging to the party, for each hide-hunter, when on the range, has two "skinners" assigned him, whose duty it is to strip his game of their hides and see that they are properly dried. But only the hunters were at home on this occasion, the skinners having been scattered in different quarters, putting up cabins and drying-sheds where they would probably be most convenient when the season was fairly opened. With them, for the present, we have nothing to do.

The reader has had a passing glimpse of Daniel Trickett, alias "Old Misery," so called from his doleful longings for his far-away home in Missouri. Also of Michael Donovan, the fun-loving scion from green Erin, to whom the pet name of "Johnny Bull," first applied by Sam, was like a red rag waved before a veritable bovine, so great was his hatred for England.

Jean La Vic, a half-breed Canadian, who answered to the nickname of "Kanuck," completed the quartette of hunters who owned Spread Eagle Sam as their employer.

CHAPTER II.

S P R E A D E A G L E S A M A N D H I S P R O T E G E .

"To look at them two critters, one wouldn't take 'em to be wu'th the powder it'd take to blow 'em to monkey-heaven!" uttered Spread Eagle as he followed the slouching Irishman with a quizzical glance. "But right thar's whar somebody'd git left mighty bad! 'Course 'twouldn't do fer me to let on afore *them*, but ef I was makin' hides on a big bet, they ain't no two men atop the footstool I'd rather hev on my side then that same Paddywhack an' Ole Misery."

His comrade gave a little gesture of disgust, saying:

"If they were not so abominably filthy! The very idea of having to follow *his* cookery, is enough to turn the stomach of a starving man!"

Jesse Purchass glanced toward the dug-out as he uttered these words, when Sam proved his true gentility by lowering his voice and moving away from the vicinity of the cabin.

"It's the way o' the bringin' up, I reckon, Jes'. I reckon a angel'd be bothered usin' his wings the fu'st time, ef they wasn't somebody 'round to show him how the riggin' worked, an' to set him a 'zample. The ole man does the best he knows how, an' it's on'y fer a day, anyhow."

While talking, Sam was approaching the little corral, and letting down the bars, the two men led the horses down to water, in couples. Not until this duty was completed did either of them speak again. But then, when the bars were once more in place, Spread Eagle Sam suddenly turned upon his mate with grave face and kindly tones:

"Ef I hain't told ye afore, Jes', it wasn't beca'se the fac' was buried so deep I couldn't see it. I did see it—I see it at the jump-off, full as plain as I see it now; but when I started to hint at it, the words wouldn't come out easy, an' so I lay by, thinkin' mebbe the day'd come when you'd save me the trouble by spittin' out the same sentement yourself."

"All of which is clear as mud," shortly laughed Purchass; but there was an uneasy light in the glance which he covertly cast at the strong, handsome face of the herculean hunter.

"It's fer your own good that I say it, Jes'," gravely added the giant, turning and placing one huge hand gently, almost caressingly, on the shoulder of his companion. "You don't want to git onto your high hoss, nur chomp your tushes when I say it; but you ain't the sort o' stuff they make hide-hunters out of—no you ain't, Jes'."

"Is that the mighty revelation? Is that all?" cried the young man in mock surprise and disappointment. "I expected to hear something

marvelous—something sublimely awful! That I was my father's great aunt, or the man who struck Billy Patterson, at the very least!"

Sam removed his hand, as though a trifle hurt by that mocking tone, and his voice was a shade graver.

"It's the gospel truth, Jes'. You'll never make a hide-hunter. You hain't hed the fit trainin' fer sech a life, an' ef you're a wise man you'll haul out afore it's too late. I tell ye this as a good fri'nd, Jes'."

"In still plainer words, you think I lack the sand?"

A motion of that big hand cut his impetuous speech short.

"No, I don't, Jes'. The grit is thar—dead loads of it. But it ain't jes' the right sort fer a hide-hunter. Ef you was cuttin' bresh fer a cl'arin' you wouldn't take a barber's hone fer to sharpen your grubbin'-hoe, would ye?"

"You think me too fine-haired, then?"

"I don't stop to think when I know it a-ready, Jes'. What is a hide-hunter? A mer-chine put up in the rough, 'thout paint or platin', made fer work an' nothin' else. An' the mer-chine as kin come the nighest to fergettin' he ever lived a white man 'mongst civilized crit-ters is the one that'll do the most work with the least w'ar an' t'ar."

"Yet Spread Eagle Sam is a hide-hunter, and he is proud of his position," half-laughed Purchass.

"Proud in spite of it, little 'un," quickly interposed the Hercules.

"And the lowest of the profession would fight quickly enough were a hint dropped to the effect that he was less than a man," added Purchass.

"Human natur', lad, that is; human natur' clean through. But it's gospel truth I'm givin' ye, all the same. You hain't see'd nothin' but the sunny side o' hide-huntin', as yit. It's jest the difference atween general trainin' an' a pitched battle whar bumshells is *more'n ripe*.

"When the pelts is prime an' the season fa'rly opens, you don't hev but one thing to do, an' that is *work*. No matter what the weather. Blow, snow, wind or blizzard, work's the word. An' what sort o' work? Huntin'? Knockin' over a few bulls when the humor hits ye jes' right? Comin' in to kiver an' a hot fire whenever your fingers, or toes or fly-flippers begin to git brittle? Waal, *sca'cely*!"

"Whar the bulls go you've got to foller, an' no matter what the weather, no matter how fur 'way from fire an' food an' kiver they lead ye. Ef you don't, others will; an' you've got to keep nigh the top o' the count when the hides is turned in ef you want to be *more'n a low private in the ranks*.

"Mebbe you'll hev to lay out night on top o' night, when it's cold enough to freeze the ears off a cast-iron monkey. Mebbe you cain't hev no fire to thaw out by, fer want o' wood or sick-like. Mebbe a blizzard'll ketch ye, an' nothin' but burrowin' into a snowdrift'll save ye—ef that does. It don't al'ays. My two han's hain't got fingers an' thumbs enough to count up the mates I've holped dig out o' white graves sich as them!"

"With all this afore ye, 'tain't a little dirt more or less that kin spile a hide-hunter's appetite."

"In time of peace, prepare for war!" laughed Purchass. "Practice dirt-eating beforehand, to prepare one's stomach?"

"That's only one p'int 'mongst a hundred, lad," said the big hide-hunter, with affectionate gravity. "You ain't cut out fer sech a life as this. They ain't no sport into it, after the fu'st few shots is fired. They ain't no big money, nuther; you kin make ten dollars fer one, back thar in the towns. You kin live like a gentleman while doing of it, an' git shet o' the dirt an' grease an' filth at the same time."

"Any other argument?" dryly asked the young man.

"One, an' that's the biggest," was the grave response. "You cain't stan' no sech a winter as this'll prove to you ef you won't give over your fool notion. Your grit'll make you keep up with the percession ontel you drap in your tracks. An' like a blooded hoss, when you do drap, it's no gittin' up ag'in fer you ontel Gabriel toots fer roll-call."

"That's a risk you all run."

"Not one that's fitted hy natur' for a hide-hunter. He's got more o' the mule than hoss into him. An' like a mule, when he's clean tuckered out, all he needs is a little rest an' a bite an' a roll or two, when up flirts his heels an' tail an' he's fitten fer to do it all over ag'in."

Up to this point, Jesse Purchass had listened with something between a smile and a sneer, his occasional remarks having something of flippancy in them that strongly contrasted with the earnest gravity of Spread Eagle Sam. But now his face grew grave and hard-set, his voice cold, almost dogged:

"Then you wish to cancel our agreement? You drive me away? Not to put too fine a point upon it, you kick me out?"

There was a look of pained reproach in the big blue eyes as they encountered that hard, fiery gaze.

"Them's mighty hard words to fling in the teeth of a fri'nd, Jes'," he said, slowly.

"Are you a true friend?" sharply breathed the other.

"The fu'st time I see'd to say know ye, Jes', you saved my skelp from—"

"Not quite that, Sam."

"Them p'izen coyotes o' the city hed me foul," continued the hide-hunter, checking his comrade with a wave of his hand. "They poured p'izen into me ontel I didn't know my head from a bal'-hornets' nest. They was all ready fer to snatch off my hide, when you tuck a han' in an' played the game fer all it was wu'th. The odds was all ag'inst ye, fer I couldn't do nothin' to help; the coyotes knew they was big money in my rags, fer I'd just hed a settlement with old Kirkendall fer the season's work; it was wuth fightin' fer, an' fight hard they did; but you come out on top, an' I was saved. You got a bit or two o' lead into ye, to say nothin' of cuts an' sick-like."

"Only scratches, Sam," and Jesse blushed one caught in some disgraceful action.

"That didn't make my debt any littler, Jes'. An' I swore then that I'd pay ye back ef ever the chainte come to me this side o' the grave. I meant it all then; I mean it jes' as much now, though you *kin* ax ef I'm your fri'nd."

"It was only the shadow of a doubt, Sam, and you can forever dissipate that by saying one word."

"Name the word, Jes', an' out she comes, ef it takes all-two-both jaws with it."

"Say that I may stay with you this season through."

"An' more'n welcome, Jes'," was the prompt response. "I was only tryin' to show ye what I tuck was the best way fer ye; but ef you think different, why, stay an' welcome. I'll try to make it come as easy on ye as I kin, by doin'—"

Sam ceased with a puzzled stare as Jesse cried sharply:

"No, you won't! I ask no favors—I'll take none, even from you!"

The big hide-hunter leaned back against the bars of the corral, scratching his chin through the yellow beard. If ever man was thoroughly puzzled and perplexed he was that personage, as he gazed anxiously into the flushed countenance of his mate.

"If I stay, I start even with the rest of your employees. I'll accept no odds, will stand no favoritism. I'm a man, if not a man-mountain and maybe I'll come out further from the rear than you think, old man, greenhorn though I am. What I want is a fair chance to make a record."

He paused, flushing more vividly than ever, for a queer expression was stealing into the countenance of Spread Eagle Sam, and a low whistle came through his teeth.

"An' that's the way the cat jumps—is it, lad?"

For a brief space Jesse Purchass seemed about to turn away with an angry word, but something in the mellow laugh and genial smile with which Sam greeted his confusion, softened and subdued him. A brief struggle, then his dark face brightened up, his hand was extended and warmly grasped by the giant.

"I'll trust you, Sam."

"Why not, Jes'? Tain't so much you kin hide, annyhow, ef you should try. I've hearn tell o' that record business afore to-day, ef I ain't badly mistook. Didn't old Morris Kirkendall sow the fu'st seed, lad?"

"If you know that much you can guess the rest," muttered the younger man, with a darker frown; but Sam still clasped the hand which tried to escape him, and his voice was earnest, full of sympathy without being too conspicuous, as he added:

"Ef a man's a fri'nd, he's wu'th trustin', clean through, Jes'. I kin guess they's a woman mixed up in the a'fa'r, fer the hot blood in your face tells that much, let alone this idee o' makin' a record on the range; but ef I know more, I kin do more—ef only to wish you sure winnin's."

It was more the look which accompanied them than the words themselves that broke down the last barrier, and his peculiar reserve giving way, Jesse Purchass made full confession.

"You know the old gentleman, Sam. You know how he was raised, and can at least guess at some of his peculiarities."

"I know him like a book, Jes'. I tuck my fu'st lesson at hide-huntin' under him. Go on."

"When I first met you, I was a clerk under Morris Kirkendall. It was not for the wages he paid me that I served him, though you are the first to whom I have admitted this much."

"I reckon mebbe you'd ketched a glimp' o' the little gal afore you tuck sarvice?" smiled Sam.

Purchass flushed a little at the term, but replied:

"You are right. I met Miss Kirkendall in society, and— Bah! I said I'd confess all. I fell madly in love with her."

"An' I don't reckon she got overly mad at it, Jes'."

"I never told her—then. I had a foolish idea, I suppose you will think. Though I was rich, of a family good as the best in the land, I re-

solved to win or lose solely on my merits as a man. I was almost a perfect stranger in St. Paul, so the idea was not so difficult to carry out.

"I applied to Morris Kirkendall for a position in his store. I satisfied him that I was perfectly capable of performing the duties attached, and he engaged me. That was only a short time before you had that little adventure."

"An' the little miss—little Luada?"

Jesse flushed, his voice sinking lower:

"I think—but I am not positive. You have seen her. You know how full of life and overflowing spirits she is. It was difficult to tell, but—I believe I won her heart."

"Bigger wonder ef you didn't!" and Spread Eagle nodded his admiration for the really handsome young fellow.

"Mind: there was no positive pledge given me," hastily added Purchass. "I told her how I loved her, but she would not be serious even then."

"But she didn't lend ye one across the 'tatur-trap, did she? Didn't trot off to tell the ole man?" earnestly asked the big hide-hunter.

Jesse shook his head with a faint smile, and Sam slapped him on the shoulder with force sufficient to raise a blister as he cried:

"I knewed it! Didn't I say so? Lord love ye, lad, when it comes to shootin' at sech a mark as them, I kin lay 'way over King Cupid hisself! The gal's yourn fer the word!"

"If I could only think so!" muttered the doubting lover.

"Ef she didn't say no, she meant yes," dogmatically decided Sam. "Then you went to the ole man, an' he said fer you to make a record, then come back an' be happy?"

"I went to him—yes," said Purchass, his voice growing harder, the smile fading from his dark features. "I told him I loved Luada, and asked for her hand in marriage. He stared at first, then laughed in scorn, and finally cursed my impudence in daring to lift my eyes to his daughter!"

"Jes' like the peppery ole critter," chuckled Sam. "I kin see jes' how he looked through them gray ha'rs over his peepers; jes' how he stuck out that onder lip o' his; jes' how he punched the floor with that peg-leg o' his'n; jes' how his skelp stood up on eend like the brustles on a porkypine! Ain't I got his pictur' down to a t-y-ty, lad?"

The young man nodded, shortly.

"I knewed it, lad—I knewed it! Time out o' mind I've see'd him that-a-way, an' a stranger'd be willin' to take oath he was p'izener'n a mad-dog. But, Lord! it was only on the outside. Bu'st through the crust, an' you'd find milk an' honey ekil to a bar'l! It was jest his way."

"A terribly disagreeable way, then," with a faint smile. "It was like flaying a man, and then rubbing salt on the raw."

"But you didn't skeer off, lad?"

"Not easily. I was in too deep earnest."

"Then it's all right," with a nod of relief.

"I wish I could think so. When he got tired of cursing, he tried ridicule. He called me a bandbox dandy. He swore that no such weakling as I should ever mix with his blood. I respectfully denied that I was either a weakling or a dandy. I told him that I was a man, in all that term implied."

"An' that sort o' talk hit him right whar he lived!"

"If so, he managed to conceal the impression," a little bitterly. "He laughed my claims to scorn, and told me I knew nothing of what a man really was. To prove it, he bragged of what he had done before he was my age."

"Not bragged, lad; the truth ain't braggin'."

"It left that impression on my mind, at any rate. I listened respectfully until he stopped to catch breath, then said that what man had done, man could do again. I told him that, if he wished, I would make a record in that line sufficient to satisfy him. I was something more than a weakling."

"You couldn't 'a' spoke a fitter word then them!"

"They didn't appear to strike him dumb with either amazement or joy," with a hard laugh. "He bade me go to the foul fiend, if I liked; that he had no further use for me."

"Jes' like him, lad—jes' like the ole man! But it was only the outside, Jes'. He said it to see 'what you'd do,' nodded Sam, clearly resolved to take the brightest view of the matter.

"He said much more than this—some time I may tell you. But I've said enough to show why I want to pass one season on the buffalo-range with you. I swore I would make a record for him, and I'll do it or die!"

"Sa-a-y, you critters!" squealed Old Misery, thrusting his grizzled head through the open doorway. "Grub's ready!"

"All right; we're comin'," replied Spread Eagle Sam, then again grasping his young friend by the hand, pressing it warmly as he declared:

"I'm mighty glad you've come out flat-footed an' tolle me jes' how the case stan's, lad. I'll do my part. I'll l'arn ye all the wrinkles I know, an' ef you don't go back to St. Paul with a record that'll open the ole man's eyes, then it won't be no fault o' mine."

"All I ask is a fair field and no favor."

"That to be sart'in. Even fer you, I wouldn't try to come no gum game over the ole man. He made me what I am, an' while I live I'll see that he's treated white. But, didn't he make any sort o' promise afore you left?"

"He said for me to make a record, if it lay in my bones, then come back to him and—"

"Take the little gal?" supplied Sam, as he hesitated.

A flush that was almost black swept over the dark face, and the eyes glowed until they emitted a reddish light as Jesse Purchass muttered hoarsely:

"He swore he'd give me the measure and weight of his boot for my impudence!"

"Waal, I ber-durned!" snorted Sam, scratching his chin in wide-eyed astonishment. "Ef he wasn't jokin'—durned ef I don't win the gal my own self, then turn her over to you! The cankerous critter! he must 'a' bin drinkin'!"

"Be that as it may, I'll do my duty here, then go to him and repeat the request. If he still treats me like a dog—I'll take the girl in spite of his teeth!"

Purchass turned away and strode toward the dug-out.

CHAPTER III.

"HE MUST WIN WHO WEARS."

LESS than a score of miles from the dug-out of the hide-hunters, at the same hour on the same day that Jesse Purchass partially unbosomed himself to the sympathetic Spread Eagle, dinner was being prepared at another camp in the foothills, and other two men were busily engaged in discussing a point closely akin to the one which set the blood of the fiery hide-hunter all aglow.

This camp, plainly a temporary one, since no tents were pitched, no brush huts erected, nor aught else done to guard the wayfarers against the frosts of night, was located in a narrow valley between rocky, broken hills. A slender stream crept through the hollow, just above the camp widening into a miniature lake, thus insuring an ample supply of that first requisite to a camp, pure water. Below this lakelet stood two light, but substantial wagons, canvas-covered, with a peculiar business-like air about them that proclaimed the "old hand," despite the newness of the outfit.

A little to one side stood a third vehicle, lighter and more graceful than the others, yet strong enough to bear its regular burden over rough trails where the only grading or macadamizing came from nature's hands.

Not far distant one could see the propelling power to these vehicles, in the shape of sundry sleek, active-looking mules, now too busy eating to think of either work or deviltry.

Near the mules were several horses, either one of which would have caused the eyes of a professional trader to glisten and gleam with covetousness.

Near a dense clump of plum-brush rose the light blue smoke of wood fires, and a hungry nostril could readily detect the appetizing fumes of broiling steak and boiling coffee.

Though the little valley could boast of little in the way of timber, above the pond a more pretentious growth was thinly scattered along the rocky sides, though the greater portion was, like that growing below, composed of scrubby plum.

At the foot of a ragged, broken-topped cedar, two men were seated, presenting a startling contrast in the face, figure and expression.

The eldest, a man who had apparently reached if not over-past his third score, was seated with his broad back resting against the trunk of the tree. He sat bold upright, his rugged face lighted up with a mixture of defiance, anger, stubbornness, and a certain portion of contempt.

His right leg had been amputated just above the knee, and the wooden substitute was now viciously plowing a furrow in the sandy soil.

To those who knew Morris Kirkendall best, this motion was a signal of danger pretty apt to be respected, and there were not many in his list of acquaintances who could have gazed into his face as it took on that hard, ugly look, without showing some signs of perturbation.

It was a peculiar face, strong and rugged. The head was of extraordinary size, well proportioned, save that it exaggerated firmness into obstinacy. There was only a fringe of hair surrounding the skull, which baldness was now fully revealed as the veteran crumpled in his huge, bony right hand the soft felt hat which usually vailed the deficiency. This snowy fringe met beneath his chin, there flourishing like an old-fashioned ruff, all other signs of beard having vanished before the keen razor.

His brows were long and shaggy, curving over until it seemed as though they must impede his vision; but those who met his gaze when fully aroused, knew better. His eyes were rather small in comparison with the rest of his features, dark gray in color, keen and steady, filled with a fire such as few men of half his age could boast. His mouth was another remarkable feature, taking different expressions in accordance with the workings of his brain. Just now the under lip was protruding and pendu-

lous, affording a slight glimpse of his strong, yellow teeth, irresistibly reminding one of a surly bull-dog.

His garb was that of an experienced hide-hunter, *minus* the grease and blood-stains, of strong brown duck.

Half-reclining at his feet, was a comparatively youthful man, handsome in face, graceful in figure, with long, rounded limbs that bespoke more than an ordinary share of muscular strength and activity.

His head, too, was bared, and as he lazily reclined on his left elbow, with his free hand he languidly fanned himself with his hat, a stylish derby; but his skull was protected by a dense crop of nut-brown hair, curling in tiny rings, soft and glossy as ever maiden wore.

His complexion was fair—almost too clear and pure for a man—with a tinge of healthful pink on each smooth shorn cheek. A neat pair of mustaches shaded without entirely concealing the moist red lips, parted in a smile which seemed habitual to him. His eyes were blue, large and lustrous, filled with a peculiar, indolent humor that admirably seconded his smile. His other features were in good keeping, and taken as a whole, made up a rarely handsome face.

His garb was one better fitted for the city than the plain, of costly material without being in the least flashy or "loud." A diamond flashed in his scarf; a slender chain of gold crossed his vest.

On his slender, neatly shaped feet were riding boots of fine leather, and kid gloves covered his hands.

Such, in outward seeming, was Leo Laughlin, whom his associates in St. Paul had dubbed "Laughing Leo," a title to which he took without any especial aversion.

"They's one thing you don't want to forget," said Morris Kirkendall, abruptly breaking the brief spell of silence which had fallen over them. "You ain't to say nothin' ontel the eend is won; 'bove all, you're to keep it from her ears!"

"Indeed! and may I ask the why and wherefore?" exclaimed a clear, musical voice, and with a light, springy step, a maiden came from the cover of the nearest plum bushes and stood before the twain.

With a rapid motion Laughing Leo rose from his lazy position, bowing deferentially, his smile more pronounced, the laugh deepening in his liquid eyes.

A more complete change came over the old man. His face actually grew handsome for the moment, and his hard eyes became soft and gentle. Even a stranger, seeing him then, could have told this fair girl was very, very dear to the heart of the crippled veteran.

"Great bulls o' Bashan, Beauty-bird—you'll be the last sickness o' me yet, ef you ain't a little more keerless—an' I know it!" declared the veteran, with an affected shiver and frown. "Won't you never outgrow them skeery tricks an'—"

"—learn you to reply to a civil question, not by asking another? Most assuredly, if human perseverance can accomplish aught so near a miracle," saucily interposed the bright and coquettish-looking creature. "Once more, I ask you, what is the mighty secret this estimable young gentleman is ordered to so carefully guard from reaching my ears?"

"I didn't mention *your* name, Beauty-bird."

"You are dodging, father!" with a shake of one taper finger; "and that is neither graceful nor dignified in a gentleman of your venerableness. Mr. Laughlin was warned to keep something mysterious from reaching *her* ears. I am the only member of the 'fair sect' in this vicinity. Consequently you alluded to your dutiful daughter, who—"

"Who's the torment o' my life!" growled Morris Kirkendall, twisting his shaggy brows into a frightful frown.

But he held very still and made not the least attempt to escape when the girl bent over, catching him by the ears and smoothing out the perpendicular wrinkles with her red-ripe lips. Very soft and loving was the light in those hard gray eyes, as Luada Kirkendall drew back and gazed saucily into them. Grim old tyrant though he was to all outsiders, Morris Kirkendall could rarely resist his only child when she took up such weapons as these.

There was a laugh in the blue eyes of the young man as he stood by, uncovered, respectful; a laugh, but not of ridicule or contempt, harsh and rough as the old man had so often been to him, his employee. If it had been, the glance which Luada flashed in his direction would have turned to one of indignation. Instead, she averted her eyes, a deeper flush mantling her rosy cheeks.

"Open confession, you know, father! As I heard a portion of your conversation, you might as well make a merit of necessity and—"

"You bin listenin', gal? What did you hear?" and as he hurriedly uttered these words, a genuine frown came to the old man's face.

But Luada only laughed saucily. She knew her power, and his frowns had scant terror for her.

"Just enough to make me resolved to learn

more; and when I say resolved, you know what that means, father?"

"I know that you kin talk the bark off a black-oak knot when you git your tongue to goin', but ef I won't listen to ye, what then?"

"I'll see if Mr. Laughlin will not be more polite," and Luada turned abruptly to the young man with an imperious tone and gesture that would have invited ridicule in most persons; with her, it only served to render her the more bewitching: "On your allegiance as a true and faithful knight, Sir Leo of the Laugh, we command your lips to open to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! Reveal this mighty secret!"

Behind the shadow of one mighty hand, Morris Kirkendall winked frightfully at Leo, shaking his head until the silver collar stood out straight in the air thus awakened. But the young man, bowing low, heeded him not.

Rising erect, his handsome face slightly flushed, his blue-eyes half-sober, half-laughing, he spoke clearly, boldly:

"To the lady, not the sovereign, I speak, Miss Luada. It is no plot of state, no high treason of which we are guilty, but a simple compact which—"

"You blind ejiot!" growled the irate trader, with a vicious dig of his wooden leg into the ground. "Cain't you take a hint without a kick goin' with it?"

Leo turned toward him, now really laughing, as he said:

"This is a case in which neither the one nor the other will answer, my dear sir. She commands; what can I do but obey?"

"Hold the limber tongue of ye, ef ye hev to bite it out!" roared the irascible veteran.

Luada glanced swiftly from one to the other, her merry air going sober and constrained. Then she said:

"Enough, Mr. Laughlin. I see papa is in earnest, and I really do not care to hear any more."

"It is not so terrible. I told your father that I loved you, and asked his permission to press my suit, with a view of making you my wife," persisted Leo, calmly, but resolutely.

Luada shrank back, with a confused air, her eyes drooping. Morris Kirkendall ripped out a sonorous oath, adding:

"By the big bulls o' Bashan! ef I hed my good right leg left me, I'd kick you so high the bluebirds'd build—"

A plump hand touched his lips, and the sentence was not completed, though the veteran grew almost black in the face and his neck swelled as though the fragment was choking him.

Laughing Leo stood by, a trifle paler, perhaps, but in no other way betraying any emotion. He stood in silence until Kirkendall partially recovered his breath, then said, in a cool and easy tone:

"Since Miss Luada must know all in time, why not now?"

"You *hush!*" growled Kirkendall, savagely. "You've said plenty enough a'ready. Ef anything more's needed, I kin say it, I reckon."

"Certainly; if you will be so kind," smiled Laughlin.

"Enough has been said—too much!" murmured Luada, instinctively clinging closer to her parent, whose strong arm stole more tightly around her, holding her very near to his heart.

He remained silent for a brief space, his brows contracted, his gray eyes lowering almost savagely as he looked at the easy, graceful figure before him. Would he always smile? Could nothing throw him off his calm balance?

"Not enough, Beauty-bird," he said, his voice softening as his rough hand gently smoothed her ebon curls, though he made no attempt to lift her face from his bosom where it was hidden. "Sence you've hearn so much, I reckon its best you should hear the hull thing."

"Not now—not here, papa!"

"They cain't be no better place, birdie. You needn't say nothin'. I kin speak fer you."

"If I prefer to take my answer from her own lips, my dear sir?" gently insinuated Leo.

"Ef you know when you're well off, young man, you'll hold your hush," harshly retorted the veteran. "I wanted to let you down easy as nature'd let ye tumble, but you wouldn't hev it that way. I kinder liked ye. They was somethin' into ye that wouldn't let me rough up like I kin to other men; but you've kicked that fat all in the fire now, an' I'll hev to take the foder as is sot afore ye."

"Lis'en, Beauty-bird: The critter told ye straight as fur as he went. He did up an' ax me might he hev you fer a wife. You mought'a' knocked me over with a blade o' dry grass! An' him no more than a counter-jumper!"

"In your store, Mr. Kirkendall."

"That don't help it one mite. Now hold your hush. You've done your sheer o' the talkin', an' it's my turn now."

"As long as you do me full justice, I will not interrupt you, my dear sir," bowed Leo, still smiling.

"Papa, let me go," muttered Luada, lowly.

Morris Kirkendall only held her the more closely, touching his lips to her glossy curls with a tenderness that was almost reverential. In softer tones he continued:

"The critter told me he loved you, Beauty-bird, an' afore I could git back my breath he wanted me to let him marry you right off—Injun-fashion, I reckon, sense we don't tote a gospel-slinger 'long with us!"

He laughed harshly, and Laughlin interposed:

"You are straying from the true trail, my dear sir. I asked your permission to speak to your daughter of my hopes and wishes; nothing more."

"An' wasn't that enough, ye critter? Ef I did myself jestice, I'd hire a stout nigger to kick me clean from this to St. Paul fer not bouncin' ye at the fu'st word!"

"Papa!" gently murmured Luada.

The irate veteran started at that reproachful sound, and then glared fiercely toward Laughing Leo to see if it had reached his ears. That smile was sufficient. The lover had heard, and plainly drew conclusions far from disagreeable.

With difficulty Morris Kirkendall restrained his rage. He manfully swallowed it down, and then spoke in tones more like those of ordinary emergencies.

"I told him I hedn't no use fer dandy counter-jumpers. He said he wasn't a dandy, but a gentleman, as good as they made 'em. He said he could show his pedigree running back to the creation o' the world, or words to them effec'. He said it was clean an' pure. That he was a man, able to keer fer a wife as well as to love her."

He paused, his brows drawing together until they nearly concealed his glowing eyes. His strong frame trembled, his heavy muscles worked and writhed like crawling snakes. His tone was savage and stern as he added:

"I told him I hed tuck one critter on trust of good looks an' a smooth tongue. What come of it? Death an' ruination! I swore then I'd never trust another—nur I never will!"

"I do not ask you to take me on trust," said Laughlin, his tone quiet and composed. "I offered to furnish ample proof—"

"An' when you said it, it made me think o' the one who fu'st talked to me after that fashion—the p'izen wolf that crept into my heart only to eat it out by the roots! From the very fu'st jump-off they was somethin' in your face that minded me o' her—o' that cussed she-wolf!"

Terribly in earnest he was, but from the hidden face on his breast came something suspiciously like a giggle! Luada remembered when Morris Kirkendall said the same thing to another, who no more resembled Laughing Leo in face than the night resembles the day.

The veteran possibly recalled the same fact, for he hurriedly concluded his part of the confession:

"But I didn't like to set him down too rough. I told him o' the vow I made long ago, never to give up my Beauty-bird to anybody who couldn't prove hisself a man from top to toe. I told him to go an' make hisself a record whar it takes men to hold tha'r own; to go rustle one season 'longside men like Spread Eagle Sam. Ef he could hold his eend up, then he might brag o' bein' a man."

"You bade me go and equal the record made by Spread Eagle Sam. When I did so, I might come back and—"

"Ax the same question over ag'in," interrupted Morris Kirkendall, sharply. "But mind ye, they wasn't no promise made to go any furder'n that. I said ye mought ax—I didn't say you'd git what ye axed fer, did I?" and he chuckled, grimly.

Despite herself, Luada had partially lifted her face and was watching the face of the handsome, graceful fellow. His gaze met hers, and a rare smile broke over his features as he spoke rapidly:

"If not said, it was implied, Mr. Kirkendall. But we will not dispute over words at present. I have accepted your own proposal. I will turn hide-hunter, and risk my hopes of winning the choicest treasure earth can hold on the result of that venture. If I succeed—I will return and ask, not you, but the lady I love with all my heart, for my reward."

Morris Kirkendall rose to his feet, one arm around his daughter, a dry, harsh laugh parting his lips.

"Beauty-bird speaks through my lips, young man. Ef I say take you, she'll do it. Ef I say turn him adrift, down the current you'll go, jest a-whoopin'!"

"Come, honey-bee, grub's ready, an' all this palaverin's made me most powerful hungry."

Without a word Luada bore him company, leaving Leo Laughlin standing beneath the cedar-tree. But she cast one sly glance over her shoulder before the lake was reached, and there was a smile upon her rosy lips. Was it encouraging?

Laughing Leo looked as though he thought so.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE OLD TRADER PAID A DEBT.

"YOU'RE mighty right he is, Jes'! A qu'ar ole codger as ever drapped a bull buffler in his tracks fer a starter to a bale o' hides. Rough, tough an' gnarly as a black-oak knot, but made o' the pure quill fer all that!"

The midday meal was over at the home of the hide-hunters, and for the second time since the sun rose that morning, Spread Eagle Sam and Jesse Purchass had drawn apart from their comrades for earnest and confidential discourse.

Spread Eagle did not feel satisfied with what he had heard at the corral before being interrupted by the summons to dinner. He felt that the young man held too hard feelings toward Morris Kirkendall, and it was with the hope of softening, if not entirely removing, these that he contrived to draw the confessed lover to a secure covert just below the corral.

With the little stream at their back, no one could approach the dug-out without their notice.

"It must be the quill of a porcupine, then!" retorted Jesse, with a short, hard laugh.

Spread Eagle Sam joined in cordially. Even that sort of a laugh was preferable to the gloomy, sullen silence which his young companion had until now maintained.

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no; I won't undertake to say you're right in that, lad, though mebbe you mought a' made a wilder shot at the bull's-eye o' truth. We'll call it rough, tough an' gnarly.

"But the old man wasn't al'ays that-a-way. T me was when nobody couldn't tetch him 'thout the milk o' human kindness come a-streamin' out, big's your arm! His heart was bigger'n a bale o' hides, an' I don't reckon he knowed what it was to hate a feller-critter. Whatever he hed was thars as wanted it bad enough to say so. He was a white man from the suller to chimley-top!"

"Looking at the picture you draw, and recalling what he is now, one could almost think it a pity he did not die young."

These words were uttered in a cold, harsh tone that drew from the giant hide-hunter a mild look of reproach.

"Mebbe not, lad. The change came over him afore the little lady come to town. I reckon she's bright, an' good, an' kind, an' pretty enough to excuse an' overbalance his failin's—for failin's I 'mit he hes, good fri'nd an' true man though I'll uphold him afore all the world!"

"I believe I heard something hinted—some vague rumors concerning a scandal or a tragedy connected with his past," muttered Purchass, stooping to pluck a tuft of grass. "I gave the matter little thought at the time; I care still less to hear the details now."

"Which is a perlite way o' kickin' me off the trail," laughed Spread Eagle, with no sign of taking offense, "but it won't work, Jes'—no, it won't work! I'm too pure a breed to turn aside from a warm scent when once I've giv' tongue. I'm goin' to keep on ontel the eend is reached, an' you're goin' to keep me comp'ny."

"Cut it short, then," half-surlily.

"Time enough afore Old Misery flips his clapper fer another grub call," said Spread Eagle Sam, with a side glance toward the rapidly-declining sun. "It ain't fer my own muse-ment that I've pinned ye here, Jes'. My wu'st enemy never 'cused me o' likin' to hear the sound o' my own tongue over much or—durned ef you ain't snickerin'! What fer?" he demanded with a portentous frown as Jesse broke into a laugh.

He knew well enough, but he did not wait to be told. He had gained his first point, and hoping to keep his rather peculiarly-dispositioned comrade in the same good humor, he resumed briskly, but with an undercurrent of deep feeling that could not entirely escape the younger hide-hunter.

"No, lad; it's mainly beca'se I'm the fri'nd o' all-two-booth o' ye, an' mean to do the best I know to make peace come atween the couple o' ye. You think the ole man's hard an' grouty an' too unreasonable fer common use. Mebbe he is. I ain't takin' it onto myself to say yes or no to that, jes' now. It's enough ef I give ye some faint idee o' what made Morris Kirkendall the s'picious critter you found him."

"I knowed him when I was but a lad, no taller then that two-eyed gun o' yourn, an' not much more of a shadde-maker then it is. It was me fer it ag'in' the world, then; I hedn't no daddy nur no mammy nur 'lations nur yit fri'nds, when Morris Kirkendall picked me up an' said he'd make a man out o' me. He did the best the 'terial they was to work with 'mited of, an' he made me what I be now. That he didn't turn out a cleaner, brighter, better job, wasn't no fault o' his."

"From that day to this, nigh onto forty year, now, livin' man never showed hisself a truer nur a kinder fri'nd then Morris Kirkendall did to me. I swore I'd never fergit it, the fu'st o' them years; I sw'ar the same thing now. His inemies is my inemies, an' ef ever—which the good Lord ferbid!—you come to blows with him, lad, you'll hev me to climb over, too."

"Even that threat does not frighten me from the stand I have taken," said Purchass, with the shadow of a sneer.

"It wasn't 'tended fer a threat, lad," gently corrected the huge hide-hunter. "Though the ole man, by rights, comes fu'st when fri'nds is mentioned, you stan' mighty cluss to him in that class. I don't know why—the good Lord knows you hain't tuck no trouble to soft-soap a road into my heart!"

Spread Eagle Sam.

"Possibly that is the very reason," smiled Jesse.

"It mought be, lad—they's reason in that," slowly commented Spread Eagle, adding with a sly twinkle of his gray eyes: "Sorter 'minds me of the ole man snappin' an' groutin', I wouldn't wonder; fambly likeness, like! Waal, may the likeness grow fainter an' the 'lationship clusser together until the ole man finds he's got a son an' daughter all rolled into one—which is the solemn sentiments o' yourn truly, S. Ingalls!"

Jesse Purchass ventured no reply or comment, but Spread Eagle Sam saw that he was by no means mortally offended by that neat little speech. And with renewed energy he returned to the attack:

"But this ain't business. I sot out to tell ye how it come that the milk o' human kindness was turned to bonny clabber in the ole man."

"I reckon you know pritty well how rich he is now, but in them days, forty year ago, he was poor enough. A smarter hunter an' trapper didn't draw breath than him, nur many hev a more stiddy streak o' good luck with the traps. His count was sure to be 'way up 'mongst the top notches when the season closed, but his money melted away like the fu'st snow afore a hot sun."

"Not that he spent it in drinkin', keerds or wimmin. He wasn't that sort. He was stiddy as the moral law. But what was his b'londed to his fri'nds, an' they tuck full 'vantage of his open hands, too."

"Waal, the ole man taught me pritty much all I know 'bout huntin' an' trappin'. I struck out fer my own self when he 'cluded to settle down as a trader, with head-quarters at St. Paul."

"That was the fu'st of his makin' money han' over fist. Everythin' he tetchet 'peared to turn into gold, an' it wasn't long afore folks begun to say that Morris Kirkendall was wu'th more money than ary other two traders in the hull No'thwest."

"Better fer him if this hed bin all a lie, or the rumor never tuck to itself wings long enough to reach *her* ears!"

"A woman in the case, was there?" slowly asked Purchass.

"That's what the critter passed fer, then," was the sober response. "How fur she deserved the name, you kin jedge when I've reached the eend o' the trail."

"I was 'way off the time it come about; down in the lower kentry; but I got the story pritty straight in the eend."

"The ole man tuck a business trip south, an' when he come back, he brung a wife with him. She was a monstrous fine-lookin' critter all folks agreed, and Kirkendall jes' b'lieved the sun rose an' set in her smiles. She was more'n a woman to him; she was heaven an' airth to him then. More's the pity! but the time wasn't long in comin' when he see she wasn't *them*, but the *other place*, b'iled down an' double distilled."

"He was pritty nigh the las' man in town to make the diskivery. He was away a good sheer o' the time, 'long o' her 'suasions, too. She was a monstrous big planner, an' hed a powerful long head full o' business. She 'vised him to branch out his business, an' so make lots more money. He tuck her 'vice, an' it all come true as she said. He was jes' pilin' up gold by the bushel, while she—waal, sense death's wiped out all them old scores, I won't rake 'em up no more then I kin holp."

"He come home unexpectedly one night, and thinkin' only how glad his wife would be to see him so much afore his time, he hurried home. He found her—he found another man than afore him, too!"

"The awful diskivery knocked all the stren'th out o' the ole man, an' afore he could rekiver hisself, the other feller filled him chuck-full o' lead."

"One o' the neighbors happened to find Kirkendall late the next day, layin' thar like a dead man. It was a mighty cluss call, but he got over it in time, though he left one leg ahind him in the grave. He hed l'arned it all—l'arned how the woman he worshiped hed bin spendin' his money an' racin' 'round with other men while he was hard at work fer her—how she hed managed to git away with the biggest sheer o' his wealth an' el'ar out with her lover while he lay thar like a dead man—an' he swore that he'd git well an' live ontel he hed wiped out the stain with thar hearts' blood."

"He did git well, an' he never fergot the oath he tuck that day. He got up a cripple, a man without a heart, without a grain o' love fer his kind left in his karkiss. 'Course he was 'way off, but then he hed turrible provokin', you must see."

"Afore he was well enough to travel, Morris Kirkendall sot lawyers to work fer a divorce. He hed money enough left to spur 'em up lively, an' he didn't spar' no expense. He got his bill, an' then sot out fer revinge."

"He hed thousands o' copies made o' her pictur's, an' he printed 'em in every newspaper he could git at, with a full 'scription o' her from top to toe, folleder by her full record jes' as his detectives hed worked it up. That was his fu'st blow, an' he folleder it up fer months."

"When he was able to travel, he tuck up the trail which his men hed kep' sight of, an' never rested ontel he run the man an' woman to earth, 'way down in Mexico, whar they'd fled to git out o' range o' them pictures an' the record. Thar was powder burned when the two men faced each other, but this time Morris Kirkendall was ready fer business, an' he wasn't the one that got left. It was more'n a case o' broken leg, then; it was a heart so full o' holes it mought serve as a skimmer."

"The ole man never said a word to the woman. He never lifted hand nur foot at her. He jes' let her be with the dead man, an' rid away as he come. He hated her too bad to kill her then. She hed done him wuss hurt than the man. Fer him, death was good enough. Fur her, it was a heap too good!"

"In them days, I reckon the ole man was a bit crazy. No right-minded man could 'a' done the work as cunnin' an' as sure as he did. It tuck a crazy man to hide from her eyes so slick, yit never once lose sight o' her. Nobody but a man with a onstiddy brain would lay low fer months at a time, lettin' her think she hed giv' him the slip at last, only to wake up one mornin' to find them pictur's an' that black record starin' her in the face from every side—to see that all the people 'round her knew what she was an' what she hed bin!"

"No, I cain't make it seem that the ole man was in his sober senses them days. Ef I could—ef I could b'lieve it, good fri'nd as he was to me when I most needed help—I reckon I couldn't never look him squar' in the face ag'in! He was crazy—an' that she-wolf made him so!"

There was a troubled look in those frank blue eyes as the big hide-hunter stared at vacancy, one hand slowly rubbing his bearded chin. He was like a man arguing against his own convictions.

The face of his companion, too, was grave and thoughtful, while his voice, as he finally broke the silence which had fallen over them, was low and sounded unnatural:

"It was to *her*—to this woman—he had reference when he said my face reminded him of that *she-wolf*!"

Spread Eagle Sam turned sharply and stared at the speaker with wide-open eyes, a short exclamation breaking forth.

"She did hev a son—she was a widder when the ole man married her. Ef that boy was livin' now, he'd be 'bout your age—somethin' like thirty-five year!"

"Remarkably close!" laughed Purchass, his black eyes glowing, his lip curling. "Only some ten years older than I am—a mere *bagnette!*"

"You look older then that, lad; a heap older. I could almost take oath you was all of thirty-five," gravely added Spread Eagle.

The sneering laugh abruptly ended. The fire in those jetty eyes deepened and grew brighter, while the white teeth showed themselves in a savage snarl:

"Do you dare hint that I am the son of that woman?"

"Not ef you say you ain't, Jes'," was the sober reply.

"I do say it! I am not her son. I never knew her. I have heard her story this day for the first time. Shall I get down on my knees and take oath to that effect?"

Sam Ingalls flushed a little at that last sentence, uttered with a stinging sarcasm that cut deep and sharp as the stroke of a whiplash. But he held his temper well in hand, and knowing from past experience what an inflammable temper he had to deal with, really liking the young man in spite of his failings, he managed to smooth down the ruffled feathers.

"You're goin' off at half-cock, lad, when they ain't no finger tetchin' your trigger, nuther. Did I say you was her son? No. Your words 'minded me of what I fergot while tellin' the story; that she hed a boy when she was married to Kirkendall, who went off an' never was hearn of any more, so fur's I kin say. What 'come o' him, I'll never tell. Ef the ole man knows, he never breathed it to me, an' thick as I hev bin with him, I'd hate mightily to ax him any questions consarning the young imp—deed I would, lad!"

"You need not on my account, Sam," with a light laugh. "I care nothing for either the woman or the son. They are no more to me than they are to you."

"Darned glad to hear it, too!" exclaimed Spread Eagle Sam as he grasped the young man's hand and shook it warmly. "As I said afore, I like you a heap, an' I'll do all I kin in reason to fetch your troubles to a happy eend; but I won't go back onto the ole man without good cause. He made me all I am. I owe him many a act o' kindness, an' ef I ever come face to face with a inemy o' his, I'll take or lose a skelp—sure!"

"I'll help you, if you have time to give me the wink, Sam. Though I can't say I worship the old man, I do adore his daughter, and my one hope in life is to win her for a wife—even though her mother bore a thousand-fold as black a record."

"Her mother? Black record?" gasped Sam, staring almost savagely into the face of his

young companion. "What do you mean by that, young feller?"

"I simply repeated your own words concerning his wife."

"But not *her* mother, thank the Lord!" and Sam removed his hat, looking toward the blue heavens with a reverential air. "Her mother was a angel on airth, even as she is a angel in heaven this day!"

"Then Morris Kirkendall married again?"

"When his work o' vengeance was at an eend, yes. He married—the purest, sweetest, brightest little woman the good Lord ever placed on His footstool!"

The voice of the big hide-hunter was soft and grave, but there was a faint tremor in his tones that caused Jesse Purchass to gaze at him with opened eyes; opened in more senses than one. But he made no comment, quietly waiting until Spread Eagle Sam was ready to resume his narrative.

That was not long. The big hide-hunter quickly regained control of his feelings, and though, whenever he had occasion to allude to the second wife of his old employer, his voice was gentle and grave, he showed no other signs of that long-hidden scar.

"Yes, Morris Kirkendall married ag'in when he knewed that his fu'st wife was dead an' gone."

"He did not kill her?" ventured Purchass.

"Not with his own hand, nur yit by hevin' men take her life," slowly replied Sam. "I cain't say jes' how she died; I never hearn the hull story. The ole man only told me she'd gone to meet her last a'count, an' I let it go at that."

"That second wife was the mother o' little Luada. She didn't live long—hardly long enough to teach the baby how to walk an' begin to talk: then she went up above."

"It fell monstrous hard onto old Morris, an' I reckon it sorter made him turn ag'in the Lord fer good an' all. Only fer the little 'un, I do think he'd 'a' tuck his own life. As it was—I was with him them days—I hed my han's full to keep him in the land o' the livin'."

"He got over that, though, in time, an' to all the rest o' the world he 'peared hard an' gratin' as a grindstone. To me an' little Luada he was kind an' human enough. Waal, let that go; it belongs to the past."

"The ole man tuck to trade ag'in, an' his old luck seemed to come back to him. He made money hand over fist. He gave himself up to that, an' to his child. He hed faith in no one else, an' I sometimes thought he even looked on me with s'picion!"

"He watched her grow up, an' was sorry that she couldn't al'ays stop a child with him. More'n once he talked it over with me, when the season's work was over an' I went thar fer a settlement. You wouldn't think it, from what you've see'd o' him, lad, but it's truth I'm tellin' ye when I say that I've see'd him break down an' cry ontel the tears made little rivers down his cheeks, as he thought o' the days a-comin' when the little gal would think o' tryin' her own wings an' flyin' from the home-nest to one o' her own with a he-mate!"

Jesse Purchass laughed softly, as he replied:

"It is rather difficult to imagine the Morris Kirkendall I have had the honor of serving, a male Niobe! Tears? I'd as soon think of looking for spring-water in the center of that block of sandstone!"

"You don't know him as I do," was the quiet reply. "They ain't a kinder, more ginerous heart in all creation then the very one that hides inside that rough kiverin' o' his'n. When you come to know him clean through, you'll say the same."

"Let us hope so!" with a mock devout air.

"He showed the roughest side to you, lad, jes' as he would to any other as come to him with 'tentions o' winnin' his one ewe lamb from him. She's heaven and airth to him. He lives only fer her, an' hes thoughts an' plans fer nothin' else."

"He knows that she's growin' to the age when it's nat'r'al to think o' gittin' married, but he's detarmined that whoever wins her must airt her honestly, an' show hisself a man in doin' it."

Jesse Purchass laughed, short and bitterly.

"He said as much to me, when I went to him with my suit. He called me a weakling—the shadow of a man! He said for me to go out on the plains and find Spread Eagle Sam. He bade me make a record to equal his, then come back to him if I cared to repeat my prayer."

"That was a year ago. Up to that day I had never discharged a gun or a pistol in my life. I had never been further west than St. Paul. I knew nothing of prairie life; but I resolved to learn all these things. I went away, as he thought in despair. Instead, I bought me rifle and pistols, and went to learning how to shoot. I had plenty of money, and could afford to hire the best of teachers. I spared no time, money nor trouble, until—well, I am here, ready to make the trial."

"An' you think you kin ekil my record?" laughed Sam.

"I can try."

"You know how to shoot now?"

"Well enough to hit a mark occasionally, if big enough."

"Casionaly won't make a bale o' hides very fast, lad."

"Then I'll give a more definite reply. If I can't plant a bullet within its own breadth in any mark you care to show me, I pledge my word of honor to take your first advice and go home, abandoning all idea of being a hide-hunter, or of ever winning Luada Kirkendall for a wife!"

He spoke quietly, but with a manner that told he was perfectly sincere in what he said. Spread Eagle Sam smiled softly, but his keen blue eyes were turned from his comrade out upon the open plain, his head slightly bent as though in listening. Then, with a silent laugh he extended one hand, pointing to where a single horseman turned a bend in the creek, riding at a hand-gallop toward them, saying:

"Thar's your mark, lad! See ef you kin wentiate that hat!"

The words had barely crossed his lips when the young hide-hunter leveled his rifle and fired twice in swift succession at the advancing horseman. And blending with the reports came a sharp cry as the rider reeled, then sunk forward on the neck of his frightened steed!

"Bored his brain-pan, or I'm a liar!" cried Spread Eagle.

CHAPTER V.

A GRIM OLD TASKMASTER.

ALL unconscious of this bit of by-play, Morris Kirkendall stumped along with an energy that dotted the virgin soil with holes deep enough for planting pole-beans, wherever his peg-leg touched the ground. He was in a grim, crabbed humor, ready to find fault with anything or quarrel with anybody, save and except his one earthly treasure, Luada. Even at her he would sometimes pretend to growl and show his teeth; but it was only in seeming, and the little witch knew this right well.

The mid-day meal was in readiness for them as soon as they reached the spot set aside for that purpose by Luada when the party first came to a halt, and before she wandered up the little valley to end in surprising the secret of her father and her suitor.

Morris Kirkendall dropped to the ground on the cushion prepared for him, with a surly grunt. He had his plate filled to overflowing, and had transferred a goodly portion to his mouth before he cast a glance around him. Luada was seated near him, idly toying with the food provided her. There was an empty plate and a vacant place opposite, and as he saw this, a red glow began to fill those hard eyes. This was something to growl about, at least.

"Whar's that young feller? Gone to sleep on the way?"

His under lip pouted as he glanced at Luada. She said nothing, but he followed the direction of her eyes, and saw Leo Laughlin still standing where they had left him, his head bare, his arms folded, but with that bright, but indolent smile clearly perceptible even at that distance on his handsome face.

"Snickerin', as usual!" growled the trader, then lifting his voice and shouting: "You, boy! don't stan' thar like a hitchin'-post, grinnin' fer wages! Mosey this way ef you want any grub. The table ain't goin' to be kept waitin' fer the likes o' you—not bad!"

Laughing Leo quietly answered the summons, taking the place assigned him, saying nothing until the cook had supplied his wants and beaten a retreat to the fire. When he did speak his voice was cool and steady as it was guarded:

"It was for you to say whether the hide-hunter was entitled to the same privileges granted the clerk."

"Nobody 'd think o' evenin' the two, 'cept an ejot!" snapped the veteran, his eyes flashing through his shaggy brows. "I never yit see a clark as was fit to wipe the dish a true hide-hunter ett off o', nur I don't reckon I'll begin now!"

"Father!" murmured Luada, flushing painfully.

Laughing Leo cast a grateful glance toward her, but there was the same cool, careless smile upon his lips as he said:

"It delights me that you rank the hide-hunter so high, my dear sir, since I have joined their noble ranks."

"You a hide-hunter? The good Lord!"

"And the rival of Spread Eagle Samuel from this hour on. From all accounts he is head and shoulders above his fellows, since you left the field; but I flatter myself my arms are long enough to reach his scalp, which I have mentally sworn to place at your feet when the present season closes, as a token of success."

"You take his skelp—Spread Eagle?"

"Metaphorically speaking, of course," laughed Leo.

"You'll think you've met four times four, with a hull rijiment o' wildcats throwed in, by the time Spread Eagle gits through with ye, critter! Take his skelp! Lay it at my feet—when I ain't got only the one! Durned ef I ever hearn the like o' sech impudence!" snorted the old trader, savagely.

"Papa, Mr. Laughlin means—" impulsively

began Luada, only to break off with a warm blush as she realized the nature of the task she had undertaken.

"That from this date he is no longer in your employ as bookkeeper; that he has accepted the challenge you flung out, and resolved to become a hide-hunter until he can show you a record clean and bright as the best ever made by Spread Eagle Sam. If he fails in this undertaking, you nor yours will ever hear of him again. If, on the contrary, he proves himself a better man, hunter, shot, than your champion, he will claim his reward, in accordance with your proposal."

"Set still, Beauty-bird," commanded Kirkendall, as Luada, with hotly suffused cheeks, made a motion to rise from her seat and take to flight. "They ain't goin' to be no more posals made this day, an' the hull matter draps to the groun' as soon as I kin say a dozen words more.

"You, boy, don't want to fergit that they's bin no promises made, one way nur the other. Ef you want to make a bigger fool o' yourself than natur' did, by tryin' your hand at the work fit only fer men from the sullar up, you do it on your own resk. Now hold your hush, an' eat your grub."

Laughing Leo bowed in silence, and the meal was concluded without further discussion. On Luada's part, however, eating was but the shallowest pretense, and at the earliest possible moment she rose and hastened to the "democrat" wagon.

"Satisfied now, hain't ye?" snapped Kirkendall, with a savage glance at his smiling companion. "Tuck the pore gal's appetite all away with your durn foolishin'! She hain't ett grub enough to kerry a hummin'-bird over till supper-time."

"The blame rests on your shoulders, if blame there be, my dear sir."

"Waal, ef you hain't got the impidence o' how come it my fault, critter?" indignantly cried the trader.

"By offending her sensibilities through making her sit at the same table with an ordinary hide-hunter."

That was a doubly-shotted gun, and probably not another man in all the range of Morris Kirkendall's acquaintance would have dared discharge it. But Leo Laughlin calmly smiled in the purpling face, actually seeming to enjoy the hit.

The huge hands doubled tightly; the heavy jaws parted; the gray eyes threatened to scorch the penthouse brows through which they glared; but then Morris Kirkendall laughed. The very audacity of this young fellow saved him.

"You're either the biggest ejot this side o' crazy-land, boy, or else you've got more sand in you then I thought," he said, his voice much more agreeable than it had sounded before that deftly delivered shot.

"I was to prove my manhood, you know," laughed Leo.

"Look out that you don't make your tongue break your neck afore you git fa'rly started on the road to manhood, boy. You didn't miss it more'n a mile that bout. I was a common hide-hunter as you call it. I'm proud of it. She's proud of it, too; or ef she ain't she'd arter be."

"Let us hope she will be proud of another member of the same honest craft," gravely uttered Laughlin.

Morris Kirkendall gazed at him curiously. He saw naught of levity in that handsome countenance now. It was grave and firmly-set, manly in every line and curve.

For the first time Morris Kirkendall began to look upon the young man as a man rather than a mere machine, too finely finished to be worth much outside of the niche it first filled.

He glanced toward the "democrat" where Luada had taken refuge, and catching a glimpse of her bright face through an opening in the curtains, he rose to his feet and taking Leo by the arm, stumped slowly up the valley to the cedar tree.

His face was hard-set, his eyes and voice both stern, but there was no longer scorn or ridicule in either as he said:

"Look ye, young feller; we want to start fa'r in this little matter. They's no promises made by me or you. The nighest to it I ever come was when I told you to prove yourself a man, then come ag'in an' tell me them words. I didn't say what answer I'd give ye, did I?"

Laughing Leo was grave enough now to satisfy the most exacting. The half-lazy, half-insolent smile left his lips and his eyes, and he looked years older than a minute before. His tones were as grave as his face when he spoke:

"You made no promises, nor have I asked you to do so, Mr. Kirkendall. In a matter like this, a pledge would be valuable only as it came from her lips."

"Which you won't, nur won't try to git now, ef you valie yer bones!" growled the veteran, ominously. "You went back on my wishes a bit ago, when I hinted fer ye to hold yer hush; do it ag'in, an' out ye go, neck an' heels, 'thout time fer to ax is it a cyclone or a airthquake that's got ye foul!"

Laughlin bowed, with an air that was almost humble.

"I could not refuse her when she spoke in that manner. I love her too dearly to deny her any—"

"Bite it off right whar you be, boy!" sharply cried the veteran, his heavy hand enforcing his commands by dropping on the arm of the lover. "They ain't no sech thing as love to be mixed up in this business. They ain't nothin' ontel you've read your title clear to bein' a man from the ground up. Unless you kin scratch up sense enough to see what a pesky ejot you're makin' out o' yourself, an'll take your davy you'll fall back into your old place without no more sech high-up idees."

"You mean to remain your bookkeeper, and forget my love for your daughter?"

"Jes' that, lad. It's the wisest thing you kin do."

Laughing Leo smiled coldly as he replied:

"You have always accused me of being an idiot; I'll not prove you wrong in your judgment by taking the sensible path you have just pointed out. I have made up my mind to become a jolly hide-hunter, and with the hide-hunters stand."

"On your own bottom, then. Don't ax no favors in my name. You've got to hoe your own row clean through."

"That is understood, of course. And now, since I am no longer your bookkeeper, but a free hide-hunter, I am going to take horse and ride on in advance to tell Spread Eagle Sam you are coming. If you have any communication to send him, and will prepare it while I am changing my rig, I will take pleasure in delivering the message."

"You're in dead airnest, then?" persisted Kirkendall, his brows contracting darkly.

"I am. I'll prove myself as good a man as there is on the range this day, or I'll leave my bones for the wolves to sharpen their teeth on. And if I win the record—if I prove my manhood to your satisfaction, then—"

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no," slowly replied the old trader. "To say it right out, I don't like you, man or weaklin'. They's a look in your face that 'minds me of that cussed she-wolf!"

The words came gratingly through his strong teeth, and as he turned abruptly away from the young man, it was clear he believed what he said. And yet, once he had uttered the same words to Jesse Purchass, between whom and Laughing Leo there was not the most remote likeness.

Laughing Leo turned back and disappeared within one of the covered wagons, after bidding one of the men prepare his horse for the road.

Sufficient has been said to show who and what were these individuals, but their presence in this lonely region, remote from any settlement, remains to be explained.

Morris Kirkendall, three-score years of age, and a cripple though he was, had never forgotten the times when he ranged the wilds, spending months at a time on the buffalo-ranges. The "prairie fever" still burned in his veins, as it does with all who have ever experienced it in all its wild, delirious ecstasy. Time may weaken, but only the grave can entirely destroy the germs.

For years he had fought against it, chiefly because he could not bear to leave his idolized daughter, and was too careful of her life and limb to take her along on such a trip.

But now the dangers were minimum. The Indians no longer hunted the hunter. The buffalo-range was as safe as the crowded streets of the city, and when Luada coaxed him to take a more extended camping-trip than she had ever ventured, while the weather promised such glorious things, he yielded and at once made his preparations.

They set out from St. Paul in wagons, carrying every essential and many luxuries of life with them. They had guides and hunters along with them, besides a good cook and drivers, with handsome Leo Laughlin as general overseer, under the old trader, of course.

Morris Kirkendall set no particular point as the end of the trip, for the weather must decide that. Though he felt to be full as able to fight against King Winter on his own domains as ever in his life, the welfare of Luada must be consulted above all else.

The weather proved all that could be asked, and now they were within a score miles of the spot where Kirkendall expected to find Spread Eagle Sam and his hunters. He had sent no word to the herculean hide-hunter, for fear of disappointment, and Spread Eagle was still in ignorance of the honor in store for himself and camp.

Brief as had been the interval, the veteran hide-hunter had almost forgot the disturbing incipent of that halt, in his eager anticipations of once more taking the field, even though it was only for a day or two, when he stopped short in his walk and uttered a sounding oath of blank amazement.

Laughing Leo had emerged from the covered wagon and was approaching; but what a transformation!

Though he could not entirely disguise his fine figure, he had apparently done all he could toward that end.

He was the very picture of the modern

"dude." His trowsers fitted his legs like a second skin. His coat was a short-tailed, light-bodied affair, with huge flaps over the side-pockets. A stiff, glossy, standing collar encircled his throat and threatened to saw off his ears. In one eye was tightly screwed a single glass, suspended about his neck by a thin chain of gold. On his head was rakishly planted the glossiest of silk hats, while the opposite extremities were incased in French kid shoes, with the sharpest of tooth-pick toes. These, with kid gloves that made his small hands smaller than usual, completed the visible articles of his peculiar wardrobe.

"Now I know you're a blamed ejiot!" spluttered Morris Kirkendall, as he took in this gorgeous spectacle.

"A remark that sounds quite familiar to my ears," laughed Leo, removing his tie and bowing low.

"Durned ef it hain't struck in, then," was the rough ejaculation, as the gray eyes glowed with utter disgust. "You take this fer a menaderry, that you come out rigged in sech a monkey fashion? Do you want to skeer them pore mules clean out o' thar hides—say?"

"Possibly they may be a little surprised," was the bland response. "Doubtless they never before gazed upon a gentleman of fashion."

"Gentleman o'—be durned! A clean crazy ejiot! A walkin' sign fer a lunatic asylum! A crack-brained bag o' wind that I'll use fer a football ef it don't skin out o' sight an' hearin' in a holy minnit!" stormed the disgusted veteran.

"Thirty seconds will suffice, if you have your message to Spread Eagle Samuel in readiness," laughed the dude.

"You ain't goin' to his camp lookin' like that?"

"Well, perhaps it would be casting pearls before swine—wasting my sweetness on the desert air—and all that," mused Laughing Leo, placidly surveying his get-up as well as he could without the aid of a mirror. "Still, if I don't complain I imagine he will have no occasion for doing so. Of course, if a man has to associate with the rabble, he must expect to put up with sundry little inconveniences."

For a moment Morris Kirkendall looked as though he must burst, but then he broke into a long, loud laugh that greatly relieved him. As soon as he could control his tongue, he said:

"You're goin' in that rig to see Spread Eagle?"

Laughing Leo bowed, his eyes wide opened with wonder that such a question should be repeated.

"That settles it! Don't tell him you come this fur with me, or he'll hev a blister ready fer my head. He'll set me down as clean crazy, sure!"

"Because a gentleman comes as your ambassador?" innocently asked Leo. "Do you really think my dress is too plain and simple? If so, I'm very sorry. I wished to make a favorable impression on the gentleman whom you hold up as my model."

"I ain't got another word to say, young feller. Go your own way to work. But take this to turn over your tongue while you're ridin' thar: ef Spread Eagle don't fire you out neck an' heels the minnit you git in range o' his eyes, then I'm a howlin' liar right from headwaters!"

Without another word, Morris Kirkendall turned and stumped back to the camp, leaving Laughing Leo alone. Not for long. A shrill whistle broke from his lips, and a magnificent black horse galloped up to him. A single leap carried the dandy to the saddle, despite his confining garments, and as he dashed past the camp-fires, he removed his hat and bowed low with a kiss from his gloved fingers toward a little opening in the curtains of the democrat wagon.

Laughing Leo rode rapidly away from the camp, with the ready decision of one perfectly familiar with the surrounding country, or at least one having full information as to the location of the hide-hunters' camp.

The gay smile did not linger long on his handsome face after he left the encampment behind him. He grew grave, and there were wrinkles above his contracted brows that told of deep if not unpleasant musings. He looked many years older than when that smile lighted up his countenance, and he seemed more like a man who had suffered deeply in the past than the ever gay butterfly the most of his acquaintances believed him.

It was the rapid strokes of his horse's hoofs that caused Spread Eagle Sam to bend his head in listening; it was his gay attire that brought the mocking laugh to the lips of the herculean hide-hunter, and to his glossy silk hat Spread Eagle pointed as a fitting target for the skill of Jesse Purchass.

Laughing Leo knew that the rude dug-out before him must be his destination, and he was riding directly for it when the double report rung out so sharply.

With a short cry, he reeled like a man death-stricken, the obnoxious hat falling from his head and rolling over and over as it struck the ground, shaken from his head by the sudden start and leap of the frightened horse. For a moment it seemed as though he must fall over the haunch

of his animal, but then the sudden shying of the horse caused his body to fall forward upon its neck.

Snorting loudly, the black steed leaped forward like an arrow fresh loosed from the bow straight for the door of the dug-out, halting abruptly, shooting its rider over its head and in at the door, the hide falling and hiding him from view!

CHAPTER VI.

ANOTHER FACTOR IN THE PROBLEM.

On that same bright November day, there was at least one more noon encampment in the range of hills which lay to the north and east of the dug-out which Spread Eagle Sam intended should be his head-quarters during that season.

Such, at least, a stranger would have pronounced it, for there were no signs of tents or other shelter from the night. And yet, from the well-trampled ground where the horses were secured; from the size of the ashen piles where a few coals were still glowing, as well as sundry other points which were more readily felt than described, this seemed something more than a simple halt for the noonday meal.

The camp was pitched just beyond the broken ground, in a clump of stunted timber and dense undergrowth. At this point the range of hills were about ten miles in width, and the same estimate will serve for the distance separating this encampment from that of Morris Kirkendall and his party.

This patch of timber was of unusual extent in that prairie land, lying as it did so far away from the more important water-courses. The solution was found, however, in the fact that several fair-sized springs broke from the surface and lent the soil sufficient moisture to sustain this growth.

Near the center of the timber-clump, a slight knoll rose a few feet above the surrounding level, and was comparatively clear of undergrowth. A single tree rose from the apex, towering high above its fellows, spreading its boughs on all sides, and forming a tolerable shelter against the sun or storms.

Just now the little knoll is occupied by two persons, one at least of whom the reader is fated to meet again and under very different circumstances.

This person negligently leaned back against the tree-trunk, with head a little on one side, watching the slowly ascending rings of smoke so deftly breathed through those moist red lips, daintily holding a cigarette between the tips of slender, taper fingers. The eyes that watched the smoke circles were large and lustrous, even as they lazily looked through the long, curved lashes, seemingly half-asleep.

The lips, hand, eyes of a woman; yet the owner of all these bore the weapons of a man, and was dressed in masculine garb!

A dashing, picturesque commingling of the hunter, ranchero and Indian dress; trowsers of fringed and gayly embroidered doeskin; riding-boots of the finest morocco and kid, armed at the heels with gold-plated spurs of the Mexican fashion, silver bells and bullets jingling against the yellow rowels; a broad belt of elastic webbing which served to support an ivory-hilted knife and brace of revolvers; a shirt of pearl-gray merino, soft as velvet, with a bosom of crimson silk, fluted diagonally, embroidered with gold; the broad collar fell negligently over the silken tie, the ends of which were passed through a hoop of gold, from which gleamed and glittered valuable gems; a soft felt hat of pearl-gray color rested on her lap; one side of the brim was pinned to the crown by an ornament of peculiar design, being the life-like and colored representation of a gaunt wolf, holding in its jaws the dripping heart of a man who lay with contorted limbs beneath her paws.

A second glance was not necessary to decide this gayly attired figure belonged to the feminine gender. No man ever possessed a form so perfect, so voluptuous in every curve and outline—a modern Cleopatra.

Her hair was black as midnight, clustering in short curls around her queenly head, falling in tiny, graceful rings upon her smooth, creamy forehead. Her eyes were large, full and liquid as those of a fawn, looking sleepy and indolent now, but even then with a smoldering fire behind them that seemed to lend a peculiar, reddish sheen to them when viewed at a certain angle. Her complexion was pure as though the warm kisses of the sun, the rude fingers of the prairie winds, had never touched her velvety skin, with the faintest tinge of olive, save where the warm, rich blood changed this to a blush. Her mouth, though a trifle large, was beautifully formed, the red lips arching, forming a perfect "Cupid's bow." Her teeth were rather large, but white as milk and without a flaw in their evenness.

In stature she was above the ordinary height of her sex, but so perfectly proportioned that hers seemed the proper standard. Her figure was full and rounded, without being heavy or awkward; and even in her present indolent attitude one could readily divine her activity and panther-like grace.

Beside her, reclining on one elbow, and at

such an angle as to enable him to watch the amazon without turning his head or eyes, was a man with grizzled beard, mustache and hair, the former full and heavy, the latter close-trimmed and giving his bared head a soldierly air that was emphasized by his figure and every motion. Though he wore no uniform; though his garb was an appropriate mixture of the citizen and the plainsman; there was an indescribable something about this man that told beyond question he was or had recently been a soldier—one, too, more used to command than obey.

He was handsome, after a certain stern fashion, and just the sort of man one would like to see at his elbow when "in a hot corner," where life depended on hard and desperate fighting: but in his bloodshot eyes, in the lines around his mouth and the puffy, discolored patches beneath his eyes, one could see that he had found a conqueror in that curse to the camp, strong drink.

"You look like an angel to-day, Queen Lena!" he murmured, breaking the silence which had fallen over them for a few minutes.

The woman started, glancing quickly at him with widely opened eyes, then resuming her former indolent attitude. But there was no trace of sleepiness in the tones with which she answered his remark:

"I am feeling more like its opposite, Major Jack. There is a taste of blood to this cigarette. There is a hue of blood in the air before my eyes. A scent of blood that parches my lips and makes me feel thirsty!"

His brows contracted painfully, and his strong hands quivered as he listened to this swift, passionate outburst; but only for a moment. The painful impression lasted no longer. He was too deeply infatuated to see aught of wrong in this woman.

"If I knew you less well, such a speech would frighten me, Queen," he said, with a low, soft laugh.

"Because it is the truth?"

"Because I would begin to fear your brain was giving way. Of course, I know it could not possibly be the truth."

"Which shows how little you understand my real nature, Major Jack Westgate, late of the Regular Service," she said, with a mocking bow and half-sneering smile. "I am a veritable fire-eater, and whenever thirst overtakes me as it does now, I long for blood to quench it as a true lover longs and yearns for hot kisses from the red lips of his mistress. I see blood in the air before me! I feel it in each breath I draw! It seems as though I must plunge my hands to the wrist in the hot, steaming tide—as though—Bah! you are shivering, my dear fellow! Shall I order a fire kindled for your benefit?"

No wonder he shivered, adoring this strange woman as he did! No wonder her hard, savage words cut him to the quick, great as had been the sacrifices he had made for her sake—in the wild hope of winning the prize he coveted.

Again her mood changed, before he could bring his tongue to pronounce an answer to that fierce outburst. She grew cold and hard and unwomanly after another fashion. Her voice was clear as a bell, but without a trace of softness or music in its tones.

"You never knew me, Major Westgate; I doubt if you ever will. You persist in setting me on a pedestal far beyond my deserts, far beyond my reach."

"I love you—that is enough!" he muttered, his eyes glowing brightly, yet with a tender, beseeching light.

She flung out one hand with a scornful, impatient gesture at his words. Her red lips curled as she uttered:

"Love—and to me? Man, you are mad!"

"If mad, love for you has driven me so."

"Do you know who and what I am?" she demanded, harshly.

"The woman I love; I seek to know no more than that."

Quietly the words were pronounced, but if hidden, the fire which gave them birth was none the less fierce, none the less easily perceived. From other lips they might have meant but little; from his they took the place of wildest, most passionate vows. A woman, despite mad passions and many sins, she could not help seeing this, and the hard, bitter look gradually gave place to one almost of sorrow and regret.

Only for a brief space. The fierce mood returned, all the stronger for the brief lapse into humanity.

"I have heard men talk in that strain before now, Major Jack, and can weigh your words at their proper valuation."

"Give me a chance to prove my sincerity—I ask no more than that!" he hastily replied.

"No more? You ask no reward?" with a mocking laugh.

"You know my wishes, and I am content to trust to your generosity, Lena," he said, huskily, keeping his passions under control only by a powerful exertion of will.

She turned away her eyes, with an impatient movement. She glanced swiftly over the scene which was spread before her.

Beyond the central spring, where the undergrowth was but scanty and the matted bunch-grass took its place, a number of roughly-clad,

heavily-armed men were idly lounging, some smoking, some playing cards and still others lying asleep. Beyond these, tethered in the scanty timber, were a number of horses, lazily cropping the twigs within reach or dozing as they stood at rest.

Around the little glade were scattered saddles, bridles, blankets; nearer the central fire rifles and carbines were stacked, handy to the grasp of their owners in case of sudden necessity.

From these the gaze of the amazon wandered through a narrow opening in the leafless trees, to the edge of the motte where stood a tall, lithe figure, its face turned away from the camp. There was something in his attitude that told he was a sentinel, watching for some particular object. And even as she gazed, he made a movement that caused the hot blood to leap into her cheeks and her eyes to blaze as though on fire.

Major Westgate was watching her closely, and now spoke:

"You still cling to hope? You still believe he will come, though for so many days he has disappointed you?"

"I do not hope—I know," she answered, shortly, her gaze still riveted upon the watcher at the edge of the motte. "Men never fail to keep their engagements when I have promised to reward them!"

"I can well believe that, Queenie!" muttered the soldier. "If you would only consent to reward me!"

She turned a swift glance upon him, her red lips curved, her jetty eyes glowing.

"It's a poor business man who pays in advance, Major Jack! And a woman who does so is still more foolish. Time enough to talk of payment when you have completed your task."

"Name it, and if I live long enough, be sure I shall come to you for payment," he said, eagerly.

But she made no sign that his words were heard. Her gaze was once more fixed upon the sentinel at the outer edge of the timber, her brows contracting as she saw him once more standing stiffly erect. Had it been a false alarm?

Major Jack ventured to break the oppressive silence:

"Queenie, tell me what you wish to learn from this man we are waiting for, and I will bring you the news."

"You are anxious to get to work, then?"

"For you—yes."

"In hopes of a reward, of course!" with a mocking laugh.

"Why not?" he said, quietly enough, but with burning face and glittering eyes. "You say you reward those who serve you. I ask you to set me some task—"

"Have I not done so?"

He flung out one hand with an impatient gesture.

"I mean something important enough to justify a man in asking for a great reward—no less than—"

He broke off with something very like a curse, as the woman leaped to her feet with wonderful lightness, drawing her tall form erect and gazing eagerly out through the tree-tops.

She saw the sentinel gazing out upon the open ground, where it bordered the range of hills, shading his eyes from the sun with a curved palm. She saw him turn abruptly on his heel and advance toward her position, and with difficulty she restrained her eagerness, seeming cold and composed as he drew nigh.

"Well?" she spoke sharply as he bowed silently.

"There is a horseman out yonder, who seems to be coming straight for the motte, madam," the sentinel said respectfully.

"Could you recognize him?"

"Not with certainty. I believe it is Dike Widgeon."

"Very well. You know what signals to make. If he answers them correctly, bring him to me as soon as he comes up."

With another bow the man turned and regained his former position. The horseman had come nearer during the brief interval, and was now riding more leisurely than when first seen.

The sentinel stepped back a pace or two until his person was entirely hidden from any eyes out on the open plain, then poured gunpowder in little heaps on three bits of bark previously provided. He struck a match and ignited a stick of punk, taking up one of the powder-freighted pieces of bark, holding it where no boughs or twigs above could cut off the ascending puffs of smoke, then touched off the powder. It flamed up, sending a cap of blue smoke curling above the timber, showing clear and distinct to any eye which might be on the watch for such a signal.

He counted five seconds, then touched off the second powder puff; five more, when the third curl arose, completing his part of the agreement.

Casting down the last bit of bark, he pressed forward until he had a fair view of the open ground.

The horseman had come to a halt, having noted the smoke-puffs beyond a doubt. Then he spurred his horse abruptly to the left, at

right angles with the motte. He stopped short, swinging his hat around his head at the full length of his arm, thrice in succession. He wheeled and rode to the right, repeating his signal, then galloped straight for the timber.

"At last!" exclaimed the sentinel, as the man rode up. "The madam has had a blast ready for you this week past!"

"A man cain't do no more than he kin, I don't reckon," placidly retorted the new-comer, as he dismounted from his animal, flinging the rein to the other, then striding swiftly to the little knoll where the amazon awaited his coming.

"Who and what are you?" she demanded, abruptly.

"Dike Widgeon, hunter-in-general fer old Kirkendall an' his pleasure outfit," was the prompt reply.

"How many days have you been lying asleep alongside the trail? Why haven't you appeared to report before this?"

"A man cain't do onpossibilities, ma'am," was the placid retort. "I couldn't say whar the outfit was to stop when the boss himself didn't know. It all 'pended onto the weather. Ef it hed showed signs of a storm, back we'd a' turned, hot foot. The minnit I made out fer sure whar we was fetchin' up, that minnit I come to let you know, 'cordin' to the 'greement."

"And that point is—"

"At Spread Eagle Sam's dug-out, 'bout twenty mile from this, 'crost the hills. Top-lofty Dick, yender, knows whar that is," he added, with a glance toward the dignified sentry.

"Very well; now about the force your party is composed of. How many men do you muster?"

"Ten, countin' in me an' leavin' out the ole man."

"All well armed and mounted, of course. Plainsmen, too?"

"Six men is; all old hide-hunters. They's three drivers, who'll count 'bout as half a man each in a rumpus; they're gritty enough, but new to the smell o' powder, an' I reckon I'll git the fidgets when they come to lis'en to the whistle o' ragged lead fer the fu'st time. Then thar's another critter; darned ef I kin say which he is—hog, pork or bacon!"

"Who is he? What is his name?"

"A feller in the ole man's store; Laughlin, I b'lieve his name is. The durndest critter fer laughin' you ever run acrost—ef he don't snicker in his sleep, then I don't want a cent!"

"I have heard of him," was the quiet reply, as a brief frown crossed the woman's brow. "Unless I'm widely mistaken, he'll prove one of the worst stumbling-blocks in our path."

"Ef you make it w'u'th while, ma'am, I reckon I kin crowd the critter out o' sight," hinted Widgeon, with a knowing wink.

She gazed steadily into his hard, weather-beaten face for a few moments in silence, evidently debating the point; then a slight flush rose to her cheeks as she cast a swift glance toward the soldier, who was watching her intently, sadly.

"There's no hurry, my good fellow; we'll let that point rest for the present. You can go, now. The gentleman who received you will give you money. Take it, go back to the party you came from, perform your duty as usual. When there is any work for you to do, word will reach you, never fear."

A motion of her hand dismissed him, and as he strode away, the amazon turned to Major Westgate, saying lightly:

"You see now that I am in deadly earnest, Major Jack! I give you one more opportunity to beat a retreat while the path is still open to you. Shake hands, say good-by, go your way, and forget that our trails ever crossed each other."

"Not unless you positively drive me away, Queen."

"If I should, you would obey my commands?"

"Your lightest word is law to me, Queenie," was his sober reply. "If you say I must go—go I will."

"You will swear to keep all you have seen here a secret? You will never breathe a word or let fall a hint of anything you may have heard, surmised or suspected? No matter what wild rumors of dark deeds performed in these parts come to your ears?" sharply added the woman.

"They will hardly reach my ears, Queenie, let them be uttered ever so loud, once I have left your side," the soldier said, his mustached lip showing a grim smile.

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"When I leave you, it will be to blow my brains out. If I can't live with you, I certainly cannot without you," quietly.

"All this for me—a sinner!" she laughed, mockingly.

"Sinner or saint, I love you, Queenie!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHE WOLF WHETS HER FANGS.

HUMAN language could express no more than was contained in those few, swiftly uttered words, and then, if never before, the amazon realized how utterly this man was subject to her will and caprice.

Her queenly form was drawn even more erect, her glorious black eyes glowed and sparkled, her face flushed with an emotion that was half-joy, half-scorn. Then, swift-changing as her outward moods ever were, she flung herself once more at the foot of the tree, toying with the weapons at her waist while her half-veiled eyes lazily watched the face of the man who seemed to live only on hope.

"You speak well, Major Jack, but you don't know me yet. If you knew my true record—if you could only realize what a terrible sinner I have been in my time—you would hide your eyes and flee headlong as from a pestilence!"

"I am no saint, myself," he quietly uttered, his bronzed face showing a warm flush, his gaze slightly lowering.

"And therefore a fitting mate for me, you think?" the woman laughed, lightly.

"Neither crime nor sanctity could make me that; only my love can bring me within stooping distance, my Queen!"

He was terribly in earnest, but the woman he worshiped only laughed mockingly. She laughed still more merrily as she saw his face grow pale and a look of intense pain come into his eyes. Truly there seemed to be something of the cruel wolf nature in her composition.

"Very neatly put, dear fellow, but—how much of it is mere wind, empty sound?"

"As I live on your smiles, Queenie, I swear—"

He stopped short as she impatiently waved one hand.

"Bah! I have heard men talk before this, and though I begin to place a little more confidence in your words than I ordinarily do in the protestations from masculine lips, even you would deceive—if you were able!"

"You wrong me, Queenie."

"Do I, Major John Westgate?" she interposed, slowly emphasizing the name she pronounced, then breaking into a laugh that stung more sharply than a blow.

The man lowered his eyes, flushing hotly, then turning a sickly white. His hands trembled, his fingers twitched, his upright form bowed as though beneath a weight too great for his powers to support.

The picture of sleepy insolence, she gazed at him through her long, curved lashes, smiling as no pure, honest woman would or could smile, plainly enjoying his bitter shame and humiliation. Weak, sinful though he had shown himself in the past, the soldier was then one to be pitied. He loved her as men seldom love. To her he would seem all that was honorable, even while conscious of sinning against her and others.

"Bah! Major Jack—you flush and pale and stammer and tremble like a schoolboy caught in mischief! Is this your boasted nerve? the grit that would gladly undertake to remove mountains at my slightest beck or nod?"

He made no reply. For the time he was speechless. She saw this; she saw how killing was his torture, but she had no mercy upon him. Criminal though he had been and still was, she knew he stood far above her in reality, and she resolved to drag him down until his head was beneath her feet.

"After all, what have you done? Only lied to a woman. A very venial sin in the eyes of mankind!"

"Not that—I never lied to you, Queenie!"

"Perhaps not in so many words, but how by implication? You suffered me to think you Major John Westgate, when your real name was and is—"

Pale as death itself, he tremblingly touched her arm.

"Not here, Queenie—not that name! My father bore it, and though his son has covered it with disgrace and shame, it should be—"

"So be it, Major Jack," with a pretended yawn behind her plump palm. "A rose by any other name, you know. Then, you admit that you have not always been honest with me?"

"Anything—say that I do not love you as mortal man never loved before!" was his hoarse, strained reply.

"Not even when you led to the altar the present Mrs. Major Jack?" she abruptly demanded, all traces of languor vanishing as she rose on one elbow and stared him full in the face.

The man staggered and sunk down upon the ground, bowing his head upon his hands. The woman watched him for a brief space, her red lips curling with contempt, her black eyes filled with a peculiar reddish light that might have startled him even in the midst of his shame, had he only seen it.

She cast a swift glance around them. She saw that the camp was buried in lazy repose, not one of the men seeming to pay them the slightest attention. She leaned forward and pressed her red, moist lips to a portion of his forehead left exposed by his trembling fingers.

He uttered a gasping sound and started as though a living coal had touched his skin. She met his gaze with a light laugh and a lazy motion of one hand as she sank back to her original position of indolent grace.

"My dear fellow, you are making mountains out of mole-hills!"

"Then you—you forgive?" he stammered, huskily.

"And forget everything save the fact that you have been making a veritable donkey of yourself, Major Jack," she said, lightly. "Didn't I tell you you knew me not? There is much for you to learn yet, many a crook and turn to puzzle out before you can gain the inner chamber of my heart—ha! ha!"

It was a bitter, contemptuous, harsh laugh as she uttered that word, but Major Jack did not notice it. His eyes began to flame again, the color to return to his face.

"Then I have not forfeited all hope?"

"Not by your sins; your weakness is far more difficult to forget or forgive. I knew from the first that you gave me a name not rightfully yours; I knew that you had once been a soldier—you admitted as much, by the way, though you forgot to tell me why and how you left the service. It is not too late to make amends by open confession."

His gaze sunk before hers, but instead of the former anguished shame, he now showed a certain dogged desperation.

"You know already. Your mocking eyes betray the knowledge. Why torture me like this?" he muttered, hoarsely.

"Simply because the whim strikes me—or, maybe, because I wish to test the utter devotion which you have so often vowed to me. If this, almost my first command, be disobeyed, it will not be difficult to add up the sum of your love!"

"I left the army, because I was cashiered."

Slowly, thickly, barely distinguishable came the confession, and the brow of the disgraced soldier was dotted with beads of cold perspiration. The eyes of the she wolf glowed redly as she saw this, for it proved to her how great was her power over this man.

"That will do; I know the rest," she hastened to say. "I know that strong drink, cards, women, brought you down from your high estate."

"I was crazy drunk when I did the deed—if I ever did do it, which I cannot yet bring myself to believe!"

"Don't lessen your merits in my eyes, if you love me, Major Jack!" she cried, with a low laugh. "The greater the sinner, the greater the saint, in my estimation. Forgery is not bad, though I would have liked it better had you spilled a trifle of blood with the ink you employed—but time enough for that. You have begun admirably. A forger. A liar. A drunkard. A wife-deserter. Your next step was bigamy, I believe?"

"Queenie!" he gasped, tortured almost beyond endurance.

"Well, what else could it be?" she added, mercilessly. "I believe you have a wife still living? Yet you have asked me ten thousand times over, to make you blessed by giving you my peerless hand. Does that not smack of bigamy?"

"I can—I meant to get a divorce," he muttered.

She laughed shortly, shrugging her shoulders.

"Thanks, but I prefer you as you are, Major Jack. A husband may answer for some women, but not for me. I have been cursed with two in my time; I want no more."

"But you have given me hope—you have—"

"Said many a thing which I never meant to make good, no doubt," was the cool, careless interposition. "Just as you spoke to me of marriage, while you had a wife living."

"Be careful, Queenie!" and his eyes glowed savagely, his breath coming hot and fierce between his clinched and grating teeth. "I love you so desperately that it may become even more deadly than hatred. Rather than lose you now, I would drive a knife through your heart, and then die, kissing away your last breath!"

She laughed carelessly, insolently, showing no trace of fear, though he looked like a man driven to the very verge of desperation.

"You talk glibly of bloodshed, Major Jack, but I doubt if you would commit murder, even were I to command you—even if I pledged you myself as a reward."

"Try me—try me and see!" he grated, for the time being no better than a madman, driven thus by her infernal arts.

"If I said your wife alone stood between us?"

"I would put her out of the way. Shall I?"

"No," with a soft laugh. "She is no obstacle, if you can succeed in gaining an entrance to what you facetiously term my heart. The time may come when I will ask you to strike; but it will be against a man, never a woman."

"If I fail you, may I never win your love, Queenie!"

"My love! Man," with a hard, metallic laugh, "you talk as though I were a thing to love—as though I were a blooming maiden, instead of—Can you guess how old I am?"

He hesitated, looking at her in surprise. She added:

"No idle flattery—speak frankly. How old am I?"

"Thirty—perhaps a year or two more."

"Yet I have a son living this day who has passed his thirty-fifth birthday," she laughed, mockingly.

"Impossible! You are jesting, Queenie!"

"I am telling you the simple truth, Major Jack," and she resumed her favorite position, watching his astounded face through her long lashes. "I have been leading up to this point ever since my spy went away. The time has come for work, and if you are to aid me it must be with a full and perfect understanding of the facts. I gave you your choice; you elected to share my fortunes, and there was nothing else but a complete lifting of the mask."

"That you might not be too utterly disgusted at my real self, I first tore off your disguise, and showed you that I knew you from beginning to end. Now listen:

"I am not the angel you have so frequently called me. I am not a woman to love or be loved. I am a she wolf—a tigress in my loves and hates! While the fit lasts, it is all fire, all ardor, all-consuming; but it is short-lived, and when the fuel is exhausted, the ashes remaining are bitter as death itself—are death, if one tries to blow the dying spark into a flame again!"

"What I call my love changes with the sun. Perhaps it is thus because I never met the right man—never found one who possessed the qualities necessary to keep the fires burning for a longer period."

"There is time enough for that. You are still young."

"With a middle-aged son!"

"You are jesting—it is impossible!"

"It is the plain truth. You placed my age at thirty; I will never see the fiftieth anniversary of that birth."

He stared at her in speechless amazement. He could not believe his own ears, though her tone and look were those of cold reality. She laughed metallically.

"Shock number one. Now for number two. Cast your mind back for a score of long years. Try to remember if you ever heard the story of Morris Kirkendall and his runaway wife. I need not ask. Your look of horror betrays you!"

She spoke within bounds; it was indeed a look of horror that overspread his face and glowed in his eyes as she spoke; but it quickly faded away, and he said:

"She was your mother, then?"

"She was *myself!* Will you never believe that I am more than a girl? Shall I get down on my knees, and kissing the Bible—provided such an article could miraculously be discovered in this community of hopeless sinners—take solemn oath that I am *myself*—the divorced wife of Morris Kirkendall—the original of that toothsome scandal—of the beautiful pictures and delectable record which adorned the columns of every paper in the wide world?"

Her flashing eyes, her livid countenance and contorted features proved how terribly she was in earnest, and drove away the last lingering doubt which the soldier might have otherwise clung to. He could only believe her now, with that voice ringing in his ears—with that frightful, yet beautiful face before his eyes.

Then it was that he proved how thoroughly he was her slave, how completely she held him, body, mind and soul, under subjection. He took her hand and bowed his face over it, kissing it with reckless abandon, muttering:

"Angel or devil, I love you, my queen!"

The wild, fierce look fled from her face, and the color came back to her cheeks. The wrinkles vanished, and she was once more a young and beautiful woman, her voice was soft and full of music as she spoke, withdrawing her hand:

"I believe you, my gallant knight! You are true to the core. What a pity we did not meet earlier in life!"

"It is not yet too late, Queenie," he muttered, eagerly. "There are long years before us both. We can go far away, where the ghosts of the past can never arise to trouble us."

"Not until my work is done, Major Jack—not until I have paid my debts in full. What are they? Listen. You have heard *his* side of the story: now listen to my version.

"I was born in Italy, though you would hardly suspect that I am a foreigner, from my accent. I was poor, an orphan, and made my living by posing as a model to the artists. One day an old man—a German—saw me, and fell in love so deeply that he made me his wife. I was only fourteen years old when I took his name in place of my old one."

"It was a grand match for the little Italian beggar. He was rich, honorable, of an ancient family, and much kinder to me than I deserved—I admit all that, now. But he was old, he took snuff, snored in his sleep, and puffed, snorted while awake. He was a sloven in his dress, smoked a filthy pipe constantly, swilled beer like a hog, detested society and—was intolerably jealous of his blooming young wife!"

"I bore it until my boy was old enough to talk and walk; then there was a terrible explosion. Never mind what it was about, or how well founded were the charges his family brought against me. Enough that I left him one night—and he never rose from his bed again."

"I was in another land when I heard of his death. I lost no time in returning to claim my rights, only to find that I had none. His mind, poisoned by his family, had turned against me, and before his death he legally disposed of all

his property, leaving me only his death-bed curse. I told them they were welcome to my legacy, and returned to America.

"Never mind the years that followed, the sort of life I led until I met with Morris Kirkendall, then a rich trader of St. Paul, even as he is at the present day. He looked even more the brute than my first husband, but I was worn out with the long battle against such heavy odds, and when he placed his heart and fortune at my feet, I accepted the one for the sake of the other.

"Acting on my advice, he branched out in his business, and the success which rewarded him, justified my advice. The blind brute! he little thought I advised thus that he might be less constantly in my presence—but it is the truth! Already I hated, loathed, despised the rude, ignorant boor. Already I was counting on the time when he would take his departure for a happier land, leaving his wealth to me. You see, Major Jack, I do not attempt to gloss over my faults!

"Well, you know what happened. All they said was true. I loved another man, and was caught by my legal master. You have not forgotten the rest, so let it pass by.

"He hunted me until my lover was killed. He hunted me until he believed he had driven me into the grave of a suicide; but there he was mistaken. I do not know whose the body that was dragged from the river; I only know that it was not mine. I knew that he returned home satisfied that his revenge was complete, but I was afraid to let him know of his mistake, he had shown such devilish ingenuity and hatred. I feared him then, I fear him now! But I swore to one day wipe out all old scores, and though so many years have gone by since that oath was first taken, it is still alive and remembered! It will be carried out to the very letter, before this month dies!"

"I will help you in your revenge, Queenie," said Westgate in steady tones. "And when it is done, you will not refuse—"

She waved him away with a sharp, impatient gesture.

"Not a word of that, if you hope to be rewarded! Not a word or look of love until my revenge is complete, not alone on Morris Kirkendall, but on his daughter as well! I will strip him of every dollar of his wealth, as the first move. For the second, I will steal his daughter away and make her a plaything for my son—for the cub of the old she wolf as he so affectionately called me!"

"Your son?" echoed the soldier, wonderingly.

"I forgot that you have not had the pleasure of a formal introduction to the young gentleman," she laughed, lightly. "I will amend my fault one of these days; just at present he is absent from the side of his venerable mother."

"Not—he is not the young man that the spy spoke of?"

"The lackey to Morris Kirkendall?" and her red lips curled scornfully. "Are you crazy, man?"

"I beg your pardon," meekly muttered Westgate.

"Granted. I am feeling in a brighter mood now that I can almost see my revenge safely within my grasp! Think of it! Of *him* a beggar! Of *her* a toy, soon to be cast aside in the dust! And then think of *him*—of Morris Kirkendall—wholly and helplessly in the power of the old she wolf! Think how I will recall the black past, making him suffer a separate twinge of torture for each blow he aimed at my head in those years gone by! Think how he will writhe and groan when I press the blood from his hard heart, drop by drop! Think of it, Major Jack!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SAM SPREADS THE EAGLE WIDE OPEN.

WILD and reckless though he usually was, the face of the big hide-hunter bore a look almost of horror as that impulsive ejaculation escaped his lips.

To do him simple justice, he never for an instant believed Jesse Purchass would attempt the risky shot, and when he heard that wild cry as of mortal agony, when he saw the rider reel and totter as though mortally stricken, he would have given his good right hand could that sacrifice place matters as they were a minute before.

Jesse Purchass seemed far less shaken, and a short, hard laugh answered the cry of his companion.

"If my lead broke skin or drew blood, Sam, then that fellow carries a longer head than the law allows. I can take oath you'll find both bullet-holes within an inch of the hat-crown. Look at that!"

There was excitement in both tone and manner as he beheld the fierce plungings of the black horse and the curious result—toe curious, he thought, to be a mere accident.

Straight for the front of the dug-out dashed the black steed, stopping short just as it seemed as though he must dash his brains out against the logs. Over its head shot the rider, dashing aside the pendent hide that served as a door, entering the cabin just as a frightened frog leaps. Behind him fell the rattling hide, cutting off all view from without.

"Be durned ef it don't look—"

Thus far Spread Eagle gave vent to the suspicion which had so startled Purchass, when it was broken in upon by a wild uproar and chorus of yells, curses and scuffling inside the dug-out. Then the giant laughed boisterously, crying:

"Cold meat or live bacon, the boys has ketched the critter, I reckon. Skeered nigh to death, I reckon, pore devil!"

Spread Eagle Sam strode swiftly around the end of the corral and across to where the silk hat lay on the closely-cropped bunch-grass. As he stooped over to pick up the article, he felt a sharp, brief tug at his flowing beard, and then caught the sound of a sharp, whip-like report.

A far less experienced man than Spread Eagle would have found but little difficulty in rightly interpreting and connecting these two sensations; but only a veteran and one of extraordinary nerve could or would have acted as he did.

He picked up the hat and never even glanced toward the dug-out, from whence he felt sure the bullet had been sped. He thrust the tips of his fingers through the oblong hole made by the two bullets, striking so near together that the double shot had left but one hole on each side of the hat. Holding the riddled tile aloft he laughed boisterously.

"Skelped the baboon critter, or I'm a howlin' liar from the butt-eend o' creation! Tuck the bark off 'm his upper story, be he fish, flesh or soap-grease! Made a — I say, you durn fool over yender! ain't you got no more sense o' pertineness then to cut in on a gentleman's speech then them?"

Crack-crack came two reports from the dug-out, seemingly fired through the still pendent hide in the door, and Spread Eagle Sam felt the bits of lead *slap-slap* against the low crown of his hat. More—the second bullet disturbed a fold of his yellow hair so rudely that a thousand needles seemed to be pricking his scalp most vigorously.

He knew that three such shots in succession could hardly be born of chance. He felt that the hand and eye that sent them could just as surely slay as graze. But he made no effort to draw a weapon or to seek cover. Instead, he faced the danger with a mixture of impatience and insolent scorn.

Clapping the already riddled "stove-pipe" on top of his own hat, he strode toward the dug-out, roaring:

"Give up your gun, Johnny, ef ye cain't do its virtues no better jestice then them! Don't do 'em any more dirt nur rub shame all over the man as made 'em to shoot straight in the han's o' gentlemen. Waal—durn a he-mule, *anyway!*"

Through a slit in the hide came two short puffs of blue smoke, and Spread Eagle felt as many bullets tear their way through his beard, passing so close to his throat on either side that for an instant he believed the skin was broken. Instinctively he raised a hand to his beloved beard, and as he saw how many of the long, golden threads came away with his combing fingers, his eyes flamed hotly, and he seemed to think further quiescence an evil rather than a virtue.

With a swift, panther-like leap he passed out of range of any one within the dug-out, then strode alongside until he caught and tore down the dry hide that obscured the interior.

With arms akimbo and the backs of his open hands resting on his hips, Spread Eagle Sam stepped before the opening, with his wild, unearthly eagle-like screech of mingled defiance and ridicule.

"Take light enough to see your sights, critter, afore you shoot ag'in. Durn a fool that will waste good lead tryin' to drill a hole through the wind! Waal, now I *will* ber-durned!"

Spread Eagle Sam stared in open-mouthed amazement at the scene upon which he had cast the clear light of day.

Doubled head and heels together, crowded half-way under the lower bunk, lay Jean La Vic, motionless as a corpse.

Just crawling from the huge fireplace, covered with ashes vigorously digging at his eyes with one hand, while the other convulsively slapped first one part of his person and then another, guided by the sparks that ate through his clothes, was Old Misery, now looking the very personification of his title.

"Johnny Bull" was flat on his stomach, squirming like a half crushed frog under the right foot of Laughing Leo, whose extended hands clasped revolvers with the blue smoke still curling faintly from their muzzles.

"Good Lawd! ef I was on'y back in dear ole Mizzouri!"

"Av I wance git the tin claws o' me ann the likes o' ye, sure it's the devil ye'll be thinkin's got hould av ye!" gasped Mike Donovan, vainly striving to throw off that weight.

"Hold your place, fellow!" sharply cried Laughing Leo, his weapons covering Spread Eagle, his face white as death, his lips drawn and hard-set. "Lift a finger and I'll riddle you!"

The look of amazement on the giant hide hunter's face gradually gave way to a smile, broadening until it seemed as though the corners of his mouth must find birth in his ears.

"Ef it cain't talk United States, I'm a liar from afore the fu'st flood o' creation! You-up, Jes'! Mosey 'long this way, you p'izen critter, ef you want to see the hull menadgery 'thout payin' a red cent! A monkey-critter that kin r'ar up on its hind legs an' howl out plain United States!"

He turned his head to glance over his shoulder, paying no more attention to the leveled pistols and threatening attitude of Laughing Leo than he would have given a painted picture.

Jesse Purchass came rapidly up, and moving a little to one side, Spread Eagle waved a hand toward the interesting tableau within the dug-out.

"Gaze on them, pard, an' scratch down what ye see in your mem'ry-box, fer 'tain't noways likely you'll ever look onto the like ag'in when this show goes to everlastin' pieces! A livin', movin', talkin', bullet-splittin' critter from the other side o' creation! Look at them white wings a-sproutin' up out o' his collar-bones! Gaze onto that ring-streaked-an'-speckled hide! An' them huffs! Nuther hoss, sheep, deer nur buffer! A one-toed critter—an' sech toes! *The—good—Lawd!*"

Overcome by his powerful emotions, Spread Eagle Sam staggered, his knees bowing beneath his weight, his head nodding forward, his huge frame seeking support against the door-casing. He presented such a ridiculous appearance that Laughing Leo could not help smiling, critical as he clearly believed his situation to be. Then he sharply uttered:

"While I see—what? A collection of assassins, or a gang of fools? As you are the biggest in the bunch, you overgrown booby, perhaps you will deign to delighten me!"

"Git the starch-pot, Jes', an' stiffen up my pore ole knee-j'nts!" muttered Spread Eagle Sam, faintly. "Run a stick down my back an' hold it thar fer a minnit till I kin tell of this is me or was I changed at nuss! Stan' by me Jes', an' keep the warmint from bitin' while I ax it—who be ye, anyhow, critter?"

"A man, half-white and free-born! And you, nondescript?" coolly-uttered Laughing Leo, still holding the panting Irishman helplessly beneath his heavy foot, still facing the two hide-hunters with leveled pistols.

Spread Eagle Sam gradually braced up, gazing intently with a look of half-awe into the pale, stern face before him. Twice he rubbed the back of one hand across his eyes as if to clear his vision, then drew a long, loud breath, nodding vigorously as he turned toward Jesse Purchass and drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket, saying:

"Take it, pard! You was right an' I was wrong! It is a human critter, after all—though the good Lawd only knows what it was built fer! Not fer use, that's sart'in! Not fer long keepin', fer the pore critter smells loud enough to paralyze a full-blown skunk this airly! Not fer any good as I kin puzzle out—but a bet's a bet, an' I pay when I lose."

Jesse took the tobacco, and Spread Eagle turned once more toward Laughing Leo, doffing the perforated "plug hat" and holding it out to its rightful owner, saying:

"Critter, thar's the chimley-pot you lost when you got so bad skeered out yender. Ef them holes ain't ornamental, they'll let the air in—an' a little o' that monstrous smell out. Come from a turrable unhealthy kentry, didn't ye, last time?"

As Laughing Leo made no move toward accepting the hat, Sam gently placed it on one of the leveled pistols, smiling blandly. Removing his own hat, he looked at the twin holes cut in it by the double shot from the dug-out, then covered the other weapon with it, grinning broadly as he added:

"Now see ef you kin hit the mark that's afore your guns! Begin practicing at short range, an' you'll git along faster. Keep it up fer a few years, an' mebbe, in time, you'll git so you kin make a target like *them*," pointing at the oblong hole in the silk hat.

"For making which I humbly ask the gentleman's pardon," said Purchass, pressing past the huge hide-hunter, holding out a hand toward Laughing Leo with a frank smile.

It was not accepted. A frightful screech burst from the swelling lungs of Spread Eagle Sam, and his face became fairly convulsed with rage and fury. He leaped upon Jesse, grasping him by one shoulder and the waist, lifting him high above his head, his massive muscles quivering as he seemed on the point of dashing his helpless adversary to the earthen floor.

Loving Leo started back, shaking the hats from his weapons, standing on guard as Sam burst into fury, and Johnny Bull blundered to his feet, only to be knocked clear across the room by a swing of the giant's foot.

"Steal my thunder, will ye?" howled the huge hunter, swaying the struggling mass to and fro as though to add impetus to the fatal cast. "Try to make him b'lieve *you* done them fine shootin', ye p'izen critter! Take it back, or down ye go to everlastin' smash! Swaller them words, or ye flatten out wuss then the slap-jack Ole Misery set down onto this very noon! Say ye lied, or hustle up your last prayin'-talk, critter!"

"Let me down—give me half a shake, and I'll

show you more of a man than you ever saw in your dreams!" snarled the young hide-hunter, fiercely, as he struggled to release himself from that resistless grip.

"You—you little wart on the back of a hoptoad! You show me what makes a man? Wait until I've spread you all over the floor like a mustard-plaster, an' then I'll laugh at your 'diculous impedance!" roared the madman.

"Only a coward takes a dare—and I double dare you to give me a fair shake!" cried Purchass, tauntingly.

"Dare goes—an' thar you be," yelled Spread Eagle Sam, lowering the young man to the floor, snatching both pistols from his belt, and beginning to discharge them in swift succession, prancing and leaping around the room, yelling like a lunatic, but with a certain method in his madness.

For his bullets hissed and hummed in close proximity to the ears of Laughing Leo, rather than Jesse Purchass!

For a few moments the young man kept on his guard, but then, as the whole truth made itself clear to his perceptions, he slipped his weapons into their hiding-places, produced a cigar and struck a match while the leaden missiles were coming fastest around his ears.

Then his clear voice rung out impatiently:

"Will some of you gentlemen muzzle that overgrown jackass, or must I soil my hands by touching the brute?"

Through all this, Jean La Vic had lain doubled up beneath the bunk, whither he had been hurled by a paralyzing blow in the pit of the stomach, delivered by one of those wonderfully pointed shoes. But as Spread Eagle began to turn himself loose in good earnest, the half-breed recovered sufficiently to crawl from his hiding-place. His snaky eyes glared around the smoky room until they fell upon Laughing Leo, then with back turned toward him, lighting his cigar amid the sudden silence which followed his audacious speech.

Flashing a knife from his belt, the half-breed stole silently toward the young man, drawing back his arm and striking viciously as a savage oath crossed his lips.

Only for the prompt action of Old Misery, Laughing Leo's experiment would have ended then and there. As it was, the cook deftly interposed a long-handled frying-pan and warded off the murderous stroke—but at what a cost?

"Durn the durnation luck!" he whined, dolefully, as he held up the perforated utensil. "They's a hole clean through it, an' thar goes all the slap-jacks! Augh! ef I was on'y back in good ole Mizzouri onet more!"

That was the cap-sheaf! The whining lament was so ridiculous that Spread Eagle could no longer carry on his wild jest, and even Kanuck fell back with a sulky grin.

Replacing his pistols in their cases, a genial smile came to take the place of that diabolical fury, and stepping forward he held out his hand to Laughing Leo, saying lightly:

"Shake, stranger! You ain't hafe as big a durn fool as you looks to be—no you ain't!"

Laughlin accepted the proffered member, closing his fingers and holding the giant's knuckles in place with his thumb so deftly, so swiftly and with such a tremendous pressure, that the exquisite pain, comin' wholly unexpectedly, drew an oath of astonished pain from the lips of the huge hide-hunter before he could check it.

Laughing Leo dropped the half-crushed hand before its owner could think of returning the compliment, arching his brows in innocent surprise as he gently asked:

"Poor boy! did I hurt you?"

Spread Eagle Sam glared at the stranger for a moment, his lower jaw fallen, his big eyes protruding until it seemed as though they must drop from their sockets, his whole face and person the representation of amazed disgust. And Laughing Leo stood innocently before him, a tiny spiral of smoke sifting through his silken mustaches, his handsome face expressing pity such as a strong, kind-hearted man betrays when he has unwittingly hurt a little child.

"Now I will be durned!" snorted Sam, at length.

The mustached lip curled a little, and the musical voice grew a trifle harder, as it deliberately pronounced:

"I, for one, have not the slightest doubt of it, my dear fellow. Do you wish for the prayers of this congregation?"

For once the limber-tongued hide-hunter began to feel that he had met his match in that respect, and the ominous frown grew darker on his bold face. Jean La Vic saw this, and he held his hot passions with a lighter hand of restraint.

He stood in "holy awe" of the giant, and for that reason had not dared to renew his assault on this audacious stranger, whose deftly-handled foot had almost driven his stomach through his back. But now that Spread Eagle frowned—now that the stranger had insulted the master of the house—the half-breed believed he would be permitted to seek his revenge, so long as he did it openly, and with a fierce scowl, showing his yellow teeth, he stole forward, saying huskily:

"You make-a ze kick in ze stomachque zat is mine, wiz you' foot, scelerat! You kick-a me, I kill-a you! I knock-a ze daylight t'rough you' bones, zen—"

Laughing Leo wheeled quickly toward him, and Kanuck involuntarily recoiled a pace, dropping his hand to his belt, as though anticipating a shot or blow. But Laughlin smiled, bowed politely, then extended in either hand—a cigar-case and a silver-mounted "pocket-pistol" from the interior of which came a musical gurgle as he gently shook it.

"My dear sir, I most humbly beg your pardon if I injured you. In token of forgiveness, will you take a smoke and a little 'smile' with me?"

Jean hesitated, one hand mechanically rubbing that portion of his anatomy which felt the most seriously injured, but this winning politeness, added to the fine tobacco and still finer brandy—for Leo deftly removed the cover and permitted the aroma to escape—proved greater than his resentment, and he accepted the peace-offering with murmured thanks.

Spread Eagle Sam had made no move to intercept the half-breed in his second advance, but as he saw how deftly Jean was disarmed, he frowned still more deeply. Who and what was this dandified stranger? Was he to be permitted to make himself the master of all he surveyed?

"Your good health, monsieur," bowed Leo, as he touched the flask to his lips, after the half-breed. "You are very kind to overlook my dreadful clumsiness. It was all an accident, I beg leave to again assure you—all an accident."

"The critter was so durned bad skeered, you see, Kanuck!" commented Spread Eagle, with a sneering grin. "He didn't hev time to look afore he leaped—he wanted to hunt his hole so powerful quick!"

"Excuse me, my dear sir," and with a bow of exaggerated politeness, Laughing Leo turned upon the giant hide-hunter. "Not scared, exactly, but surprised. That word has a better sound, and comes a trifle closer to the mark."

"Frankly, I was greatly surprised. I came to this place, expecting to meet men, if not gentlemen. But—"

He paused, with a cold, hard smile playing around his lips. Spread Eagle Sam flushed hotly, but managed to growl out:

"Durn your *buts*—spit out what ye got to say, critter!"

"Instead—I met Spread Eagle Sam!"

CHAPTER IX.

CLIPPING THE EAGLE'S WINGS.

AGAIN Laughing Leo bowed, a smile on his lips, a dancing devil in his eyes, his tones as smooth and placid as though he dealt only in honeyed compliments; but there was a completely furnished hornets' nest lying behind that plausible ambush, and the anger-paling face of Spread Eagle Sam showed plainly enough that he felt the poisoned sting.

The matchless impudence of this dandified stranger was so entirely unexpected that he was taken all aback for a brief space. And to that fact, either he or Laughing Leo—perhaps both—owed their lives.

Jesse Purchass, after firing those reckless shots, had entered into the mad humor of the Hercules Hide-Hunter but half-heartedly, and now he was thoroughly ashamed of even that part as he saw how well the stranger was "panning out."

He saw that the rude jest was rapidly becoming deadly earnest. He saw Spread Eagle shrink from that keen home-thrust, and he knew from experience that the reaction would be swift and deadly as a stroke of lightning unless the big hunter could be checked long enough to take a second thought.

He stepped between the two men, grasping the quivering arms of the stung giant and forcing him back a pace before Spread Eagle Sam could divine his purpose. He gazed firmly into those glowing eyes, and his voice was half-sharp, half-pleading as he uttered the words:

"Touch it lightly, old man, if you love your pard! A joke is a joke, but don't rub it in *too* deep. Show yourself half white, mate. This is my pie, since I cut in first. If you will insist on taking it all, you've got to eat me with it!"

It was a risky deed, but the young hide-hunter had not counted amiss. He knew that Sam was true steel at the bottom. Frank, honest and generous, if he could only be held in check long enough to take a second sober thought, all would be well.

Keen-eyed, quick-witted, Purchass saw that his point was won, and releasing his grasp, he turned toward the stranger, a frank smile on his face, his voice apologetic.

"I'm afraid you'll think you have fallen into a nest of savages, my dear sir; but, after all, though rudely and clumsily carried out, it was all a joke, free from actual malice. As I opened the ball, let me close it by saying that I am heartily ashamed of my share, and frankly beg your pardon."

"Which is just as frankly accepted, my dear fellow," replied Laughing Leo, cordially grasping the extended hand. "I only regret that I failed so completely in holding up my end of the jest."

"Durn sech fool' doin's, anyway!" snuffled Old Misery, who still stood, like a grizzled parody on Lady Macbeth, staring at the "damned spot" which would not out of the bottom of his frying-pan. "Who's to fill up this gre't hole ag'in? Who's goin' clean to the settlements fer another fryin'-pan? Whar's the flap-jacks to come from? That's what I want to know! Augh! *durn* sech a kentry! Ef I was on'y back in good ole Mizzouri once ag'in—ef I on'y was!"

That snuffling plaint proved the feather which turned the balance against bloody war. Laughing Leo broke into a gay peal, joined heartily by Jesse. Spread Eagle Sam was forced to follow suit, and even Jean La Vic grinned, after a fashion. As for Johnny Bull, he remained still propped up against the side of the dug-out, staring vacantly at the dandified stranger, as yet unable to properly class him.

"Snicker 'e durned ejoints!" snuffled Old Misery. "Ef you hed the cookin' to do, mebbe you wouldn't feel so mighty contraptious—no you wouldn't!"

Jesse Purchass stooped and picked up the silk hat, now pretty well shorn of its glory, examining the double hole with a rueful smile before handing it to Laughing Leo.

"You'll have to charge it against me, I'm afraid, until the day comes when we can meet far enough inside of civilization to find its duplicate."

"Never mention it, sir," blandly smiled Laughlin, as he took the injured article and tipped it gracefully on one side of his handsome head. "I think it is an improvement, rather than otherwise. It will do to hand down to posterity, as a proof that the owner really had been through the wars!"

"I was in a bad humor at the time, and when that hat—"

"Which no white or human critter would think o' warin' in these parts," broke in Spread Eagle, gruffly. "We tuck it fer a monkey break loose, or a squaw-man out on a bender!"

"Possibly you may find out that the wearer is a man, without the squaw, before the end is reached, my pleasant-voiced little fellow," said Laughing Leo, coolly taking the measure of the nettled giant with his eyes, from crown to sole.

"Dew tell! I want to know!" snuffled Sam, grinning.

"I've got money that says you'll know more to-morrow than you did when you crawled out of your hole this morning. One point on which you will gain enlightenment is this: there is not room enough in this palace for *two* bosses!"

Spread Eagle Sam was absolutely stupefied by this sharp, clear-cut sentence. He stared at the speaker, one hand slowly rising to his chin; but the fingers seemed unable to perform their duty. His under jaw fell, his big blue eyes protruded so far from his head that, as Johnny Bull afterward confidentially whispered, "you c'd'a batted them off wid a sthick, an' niver lit the wood go widin' a fut av the nose betune them! Divil a lie in it, nayther, honey!"

Jesse Purchass feared another mad outbreak on the part of his huge pard, and once more stepped between the twain; but, luckily at that juncture Old Misery whined, peevishly:

"Come to grub, ye pesky spit-cats! Sech as it is—with nary a fryin' pan fer to do anythin' nur nothin'!"

With all his faults, Spread Eagle Sam was too hospitable a man to crowd a quarrel in the face of such an invitation.

The dark, troubled cloud fled from his face, and in a tone of hearty welcome, he said:

"Tain't much we've got to offer ye, stranger, but sech as it is, mebbe you kin make out a meal. Sit by, an' holp yourself to whatever ye kin find that hits your tooth best."

Laughing Leo bowed slightly, then glanced around him.

It is a religious rule with hide-hunters, and, for that matter, any set of men who live lives anything similar, to eat often, long and heartily. Living up to this maxim, Old Misery began his preparations for supper before the uncere-monious advent of Laughing Leo. He had a huge pot full of "mummux," or a nondescript stew, already prepared and resting in one corner of the big fireplace, intending to fry some steaks and cook some "slap-jacks" in addition. The unlucky stroke of Jean La Vic's knife put an end to this portion of the programme, so he had but to boil the coffee, draw out the table, plant the steaming pot in the center, range the seats, and then summon the company to their feast.

The "table" consisted of a wide plank, fitted with swinging legs which closed up when a meal was over, the board being shoved under a bunk, to get it out of the way. The seats were rude stools, with one exception formed of blocks of wood. That exception was a huge buffalo-head, dried with the horns and hair still on it, standing at the head of the table.

Laughing Leo noted this difference, and divining the truth, he coolly advanced and took the seat of honor. Spread Eagle Sam opened his lips to angrily correct him, but remembering his position as host, said not a word, but dropped upon an adjoining seat. Jesse Purchass sat next to him, watchful, uneasy, fearing trouble before all was done.

Leo Laughlin tucked a snowy-white silk hand-kerchief under his chin, then gazed in mute disgust at the tin plate before him. In the middle was a streak of ashes. On one side was a correct impression of Old Misery's broad thumb, in pot-black and grease.

Spread Eagle grinned sourly as he watched this little by-play, then gently inquired:

"Waitin' fer somebody to talk to thar plate, stranger? Ef you cain't grub 'thout a blessin', reckon you'll hev to come the preacher your own self; 'tain't 'zactly in our line."

"Cook, will you oblige me with a clean plate?" gently uttered Leo, glancing at Old Misery.

The sunken eyes of the old man glittered ominously for a moment, and he glanced toward Sam. That worthy nodded slightly, and with a sickly grin, Old Misery reached across the table and took the dish. He squinted at it, turning the plate at an angle for the brighter light to fall athwart it, then grunted:

"They is a leetle speck o' dust onto it, I swan! Beats all how sech things come—never knowed it so back in good ole Mizzouri!"

He spat into the plate, rubbed it vigorously with his elbow, then handed it back with a complacent grin, whining:

"Does that suit ye, boss?"

Laughing Leo, bowing politely, took the plate, dropping it before Spread Eagle Sam, taking the other in exchange. This he closely examined, then daintily wiped it with a corner of his kerchief before helping himself to a small portion of the stew.

Old Misery stared in stupefied amazement. Spread Eagle Sam quivered all over, but Jesse Purchass gripped his arm tightly, and recalled him to his cooler senses. Johnny Bull snickered right out, and Kanuck turned his head to cough—an instance of remarkable politeness on his part.

Sam slowly uttered, his voice thick and unnatural:

"Eat your fill, stranger. When you've got through, they's a word or two I want to whisper in them lugs o' yours."

"Then, as now, I am entirely at your service, my dear fellow," politely responded Laughing Leo.

No more was said just then. Laughing Leo alone appeared wholly at his ease. The rest looked and acted like men who felt a serious storm was impending.

Laughing Leo ate daintily, and was not long in satisfying his appetite. He leaned back in his chair, or stool, glancing seriously over his present companions. Jean La Vic, dipping his fingers into the half-emptied pot, offered him a subject for a lecture on common decency, which he promptly improved.

"That is another thing which should, and shall, be remedied in this camp. Because men are hide-hunters, there is no reason why they should live or act like mine. It is just as easy to live and act decently, and costs no more in the long run. There is no excuse for a cook to serve foul messes up in filthy dishes. There is no excuse for him to come to table with ashes in his hair and beard, smut on his hands and face, grease and dirt and blood and hairs all over his clothes."

"Mebbe you don't like it, critter?" snarled Old Misery.

"I am free to own I do not," decisively retorted Laughing Leo. "More than that, I will not permit such insults to common decency. If the fault can be remedied in no other manner, a daily ducking in the creek without may serve to reform the gentleman from Missouri."

Old Misery half-rose from his seat, livid with rage; but a rapid gesture from Spread Eagle caused him to sink back in silence.

With a cool bow, Laughing Leo turned to the huge hide-hunter, adding:

"Thanks. I am glad to see you agree with me in this view of the matter. A beggar can remain a gentleman; then why not a party of honest hide-hunters?"

"Which you're what you call a gentleman, I reckon?" said Spread Eagle, with slow and painful politeness.

"I make some faint pretensions that way, certainly."

"Then I reckon we'll keep on gruntin'," nodded Sam.

His comrades laughed boisterously, but Laughlin yawned lazily behind his white hand. When the uproar died away, he spoke again:

"A fearfully moldy chestnut, that of yours, my good fellow. Do you often commit such outrages?"

Sam said nothing, possibly because he failed to catch the precise meaning of his strange guest. Leo added:

"There is but one excuse for you. You have lived out of the world of civilization so much of your lives, that you can appreciate nothing above your present low level. To illustrate:

"You looked only at my garb. Because it differed from the one you wear, you thought I must belong to another race. You thought you could readily impose upon me, without running the risk of getting your fingers scorched. You thought because I dressed, acted, talked like a gentleman, I must have been reared like a

woman, weak-nerved, weak-armed, weak-headed. Instead, what did you find?

"That I am a man, as well as a gentleman. That I can use the tools of your boasted craft quite as adroitly as the best ruffian among you. That I have more nerve, more sand, more of what goes to make up a real, genuine man, than you have in your whole carcass, big as it is!"

Laughing Leo leaned carelessly on one elbow, his head a trifle on one side, the better to enable him to look into the face of the man he addressed. There was a faint smile, as of contempt, playing around his red lips, but the light which filled his large blue eyes was hard and even menacing. His voice was low and even, musical as the far-off notes of a flute over water, but cutting like a keen-edged knife.

Spread Eagle Sam made no motion to check his speech, listening to his words with a calmness strange in one of his hot, peppery temper. As Laughlin proceeded, the face of the big hide-hunter turned white as ashes, and a pinched, hungry look settled around his curved nostrils, always a sign of danger.

"Stranger," he said, when Laughing Leo came to a pause. "Stranger, you're in my house, settin' at my table, eatin' of my victuals. You kin pour insults out by the gallon, long as you sit thar, an' my ruff kivers ye over. You kin tell the truth, or you kin lie, all the same. You kin take what pleases ye, or you kin let it all alone. But when you've done an' said an ett an' rested all you want; when you git tired o' stayin' in this house, sech as it is, then—"

He paused abruptly, turning his blazing eyes away and fell to eating like one almost starved. Laughing Leo coolly watched him until he ceased to take breath, then asked:

"You did not finish your speech, my dear fellow. When I decide to leave this palace, what will happen?"

"I'll show you a man, ef he ain't a gent!" savagely.

"Without holding up a mirror?" drawled Laughlin.

Jesse Purchass, who had until now maintained an unbroken silence, even while angrily chafing against the matchless insolence of this stranger, now leaned forward and said, sternly:

"Sir, if at first we treated you rudely, as I have already admitted, we made what amends lay in our power. I, as the one who started this unfortunate affair, humbly and sincerely begged your pardon. I offered you my hand, and you accepted it. Among gentlemen, this would have been the end to a really harmless, if a trifle coarse, jest. In refusing to accept that ending, you have shown yourself what you accuse us of being, a brute, an animal unfit to associate with gentlemen."

Leo Laughlin laughed coldly at this fiery outburst, languidly waving one white hand as though to brush away some insignificant but annoying insect. No torrent of words could have been more irritating, or conveyed so bitter an insult, and livid with rage, Jesse Purchass leaped to his feet, only to be caught by the mighty grasp of the Hercules Hide-Hunter, and held absolutely powerless.

"Let the critter belch, Jes'. He's my meat, an' I'll barbecue him in prime style the minnit he tries to sneak out o' this house—I will, so help me!"

Few men could have listened to that deep tone, have looked into those blazing eyes, and not felt fear. But Laughing Leo was one of those few, and his voice was even as ever, cold and stinging, each word like a slap in the face:

"Allow me to correct you, my good man. You meant to say you would try—but doing is quite a different thing. I came from a part of the country where they throw away all such abortions as you are—or save them to use as scare-crows."

"You call yourself Spread Eagle Sam, the best man on the buffalo-range. I deny that claim. I am your master, take me how you will. I came here expressly for the purpose of clipping your wings, and if you will take the trouble to step outside for five minutes I'll finish up the job off-hand."

With a hoarse, grating cry Spread Eagle leaped to his feet and rushed out of doors, fairly insane with rage. His comrades also rose, as did Laughing Leo, who coolly unbuckled the belt of arms which was hidden beneath his tightly buttoned coat. He cast the weapons on one of the bunks, following it with coat and vest, standing stripped to his trowsers and shirt as Spread Eagle thrust his head in at the opening with:

"Ef you're comin'— What ye mean by *that*, critter? Whar' your weapons?"

"Always on hand, critter," laughed Leo, as he playfully shook his clinched hands in sparring fashion. "I claimed to be your master in and at everything. If I begin with steel or lead and kill you—as I surely would, if you choose those tools—I would cheat myself out of all chance to whip you still further in detail. Can you understand that, mammoth?"

"You mean a stan-up fist-fight, then?"

"That, or rough-and-tumble, just as suits you best."

Without a word Spread Eagle Sam removed his weapons and stripped off his "jumper."

He drew back from the doorway, and Laughing Leo leaped lightly outside the hut.

"One word, first," he cried, as Sam was about to rush at him with ungovernable fury. "I am dealing with Spread Eagle Sam alone at present. After I have polished him off and clipped his wings, I will accommodate any or all of you—one down, the other come on. Is that understood?"

"I'll kill the one as lifts a finger aginst ye!" grated Sam, eager for the fray. "When I git through with ye, they won't be even a smell left fer anybody else!"

"Think so?" laughed Leo, leaping forward and tapping him lightly on each cheek, then jumping back out of danger before Sam could make a blow or a move.

This capping insult produced the precise effect Leo calculated upon. Blind with fury, the giant rushed to close, only to be deftly evaded, while stinging blows, sharp and cutting, rained upon him so swiftly following each other that the eyes of the watchers could scarcely follow them. It was skill vs. brute strength, and the result may be guessed easily enough.

Less than five minutes later Spread Eagle Sam went down before two terrible blows on his throat, lying motionless.

Laughing Leo had kept his word. The Eagle's wings were clipped!

CHAPTER X.

TO THE VICTOR BELONGS THE SPOIL.

As Spread Eagle Sam fell headlong to the ground with a dull, sudden sound that showed he made no effort to break his fall, lying still and without motion, Laughing Leo gazed keenly at him for a brief space, then his mocking air gave place to gravity. He stepped forward, stooped over the fallen giant, and before one of the almost stupefied spectators could divine his purpose, he lifted the giant form in his arms and bore it swiftly down to the sloping bank of the creek beyond the corral. It was a marvelous exhibition of strength, and all save one of the hide-hunters began to regard this peculiar intruder with something closely akin to superstition.

Paying them not the slightest attention, Laughing Leo deposited the senseless hide-hunter beside the water, in an easy position, then dashed the cold water repeatedly into his face.

Sam shivered slightly, the tremor growing stronger until articulate sounds broke from his lips:

"Look out, critter! Yar I come, head up an'—"

Despite himself, Leo burst into a clear, merry laugh as he caught this warning, and the sound acted on Spread Eagle Sam like a shock from a galvanic battery.

His eyes shot open, his head uplifted and he glared about him with a vague ferocity that was ludicrous enough, when all the circumstances are remembered.

Laughing Leo stooped over him, his voice all tenderness and consideration as he uttered:

"I trust you are feeling a little better, my dear sir?"

"Waal, I ber-durned!" slowly ejaculated Sam, as his head fell back and one hand mechanically sought his chin with that old, familiar action. "It's the monkey-critter!"

"At your service, Spread Eagle."

It was a thorough puzzle to the confused and scattered senses of the herculean hide-hunter. For the time being he had not the ghost of an idea what had happened; he only remembered that he had set out to annihilate this laughing, mocking devil; yet there he stood, calm and still laughing!

"Then I didn't—I didn't drive you clean into the airth, critter?" he slowly asked.

"Do I look as though I had been used as a pile?" laughed his adversary, the big blue eyes dancing merrily.

He certainly did not. There was not a mark nor a scar upon his handsome face; barring a little deeper flush upon his cheeks, the result of the violent exercise, Laughing Leo presented precisely his ordinary appearance.

Stunned, confused though he was, Spread Eagle Sam could not avoid noticing this fact, and for the first time a sickening, awful wonder leaped into existence, and he muttered:

"You didn't—I ain't bin *licked*, stranger?"

"Simply struck by lightning, my dear fellow," laughed Leo as he stepped back and motioned Jesse Purchass to take his place.

"You won't lie to a old mate, Jes'," the stunned giant muttered as Purchass knelt beside him. "That smellin' bottle didn't lick me, did he?"

"I'm afraid that's about what we'll have to call it, old man," was the uneasy reply.

"Licked—me!" and the trembling fingers scratched his chin with something like their accustomed energy. "Licked in fa'r fight, was it, Jes'? No hoodoo business?"

Spread Eagle touched his bruised face, his swollen nose, his puffed-up and watering eyes, then noticed his damp and dripping frame with something like a frown.

"Licked me—then give me a duckin' as the

fu'st step in scrubbin' out the ranch, did he? Chucked me in the crick?"

As the briefest way of satisfying the amazed Hercules, Jesse Purchass gave him a terse account of the fight and of what followed. Spread Eagle Sam even then was unable to accept or comprehend the real facts.

A man of his great size and weight, coupled with immense strength and undisputed courage, should have been able to crush an adversary like this audacious intruder, at a single effort. Let those hands once close upon him—

And right there Spread Eagle Sam began to realize the cause of his defeat. He had not been able to grasp hold of Laughing Leo. His fierce rushes had all been eluded, while those small but steel-like fists were continually in his face, working with the precision and force of piston-rods, blinding and rendering him still more rash and headlong, until those terrible blows on his throat! Only for them!

"But what's the use?" he muttered, with a sickly smile as he rose to a sitting posture, glancing into the dark face of his *protege*. "With my grip once fa'rly onto him, I'd 'a' broke him in two, like he was a rotten stick; but he was too good a man fer that. He licked me. It's a bitter pill, but it must be tuck! I'm goin' to tell him so."

With an effort Spread Eagle Sam rose to his feet and staggering for a moment like one with the vertigo, he steadied himself and moved toward Laughing Leo who smilingly watched his uncertain footsteps.

"Stranger," said the big hide-hunter, his voice hoarse and strained, betraying his concealed emotion, "I come to you as soon as I could find my legs, to say that I've made a jassack out o' myself, so fur's you're consarned."

"Surely you are not satisfied this early?" ejaculated Laughing Leo, arching his brows in mock surprise.

Spread Eagle Sam drew himself erect at this sneering speech, and despite his bruised and battered face, there was a native dignity in his voice and manner that brought a flush of shame to the cheeks of his adversary.

"I say I'm licked—but it's licked by the truth, not by you, yourself. I tuck you fer a wind-bag an' a no-count squirt. I found you a man, good as they make 'em in all that a man wants. I say this 'cause it's a duty I owe to my own self, an' not through any skeer o' you or the fists you kin han'le so red-hot. An' now it's said, stranger, ef you ain't satisfied, I'm your man ag'in in any way you like to mention. I kin stay licked, ef it's a true man that does the lickin'; but ef he tries to rub it in an' git double glory out of his work, I'm a hundred times a better man than he dares to be!"

With a frank smile, Laughing Leo grasped his hand and shook it cordially. And his tones were respectful as he said:

"I accept the reproof, and acknowledge myself in the wrong, Mr. Ingalls. Set it down to inflated vanity at having achieved even such a trivial victory over an adversary so widely known and justly celebrated as Spread Eagle Sam, the best hide-hunter on the range!"

Sam blinked a little suspiciously at the utterer of this glib speech, but he could see nothing but genuine frankness in that bright, handsome face, and only muttered a few inarticulate words in reply as they all moved back to the dug-out.

Laughing Leo quickly donned his outer garments and rebuckled the belt of arms about his waist before speaking again. His voice was grave enough, but the laughing devil was in his eyes still.

"Gentlemen, you have had your joke, and I trust that you have found the game worthy your powder. I have done the best I knew to fall in with your peculiar humor, and to make the jest a success. If I have failed through any fault of my own, I humbly beg your pardon."

"No need o' that, stranger," commented Spread Eagle Sam, with a sickly grin. "You went through with the circus as ef you'd made it a study all your life. 'Tain't no fault o' yours ef we hain't split our ribs clean open with laughin'—you ladled out the fun by the bucketful. Some day—say a year or two off—mebbe we'll begin to see whar our sheer o' the funny part comes in at."

"But he needn't 'a' made sech a monstrous fuss over a teeny bit o' ashes, like *them*!" whimpered Old Misery. "Never see the like o' that back in good ole Missouri!"

"Well, gentlemen, as the funny part is disposed of, suppose we get down to business? I did not come here merely to take a part in a circus. I am bearer of a message from Mr. Morris Kirkendall, who expects to have the pleasure of meeting you all some time to-morrow."

A vivid light flashed into the dark eyes of Jesse Purchass, while Spread Eagle Sam uttered a sounding oath.

"Why didn't you say so fu'st off?" he sharply demanded.

"Why did you shoot before demanding my business?" laughed Leo. "I believed this dug-out was the place I was aiming for, but of course I could not be absolutely certain. It seemed a little doubtful, to say the least, when those bullets came slap through my hat. My

first idea was that I had fallen into an ambuscade of robbers or red-skins, and my second was to get under cover as quickly as possible. I played a little trick, to check any more leaden compliments, and you saw how I entered the cabin."

"An' fil it, too!" muttered Johnny Bull, dolefully.

"Ah! zem toes *infernale!*" said Jean La Vic, rubbing his stomach tenderly. "Monsieur, ven you come-a some more like-a zis time, you fassen ze fezzer-bag on-a you' toes, eh?"

Laughing Leo nodded, smilingly, and the half-breed was satisfied.

"As I said, Morris Kirkendall is coming here to-morrow. He longs for a brief taste of the old life, and to add to it a peculiar zest, he has brought company along with him. He wishes to show the lady how he laid the foundation of his fortune, as a hide-hunt'r."

"The lady!" exclaimed Jesse Purchass, his face flushed crimson, his black eyes all aglow. "Surely you do not mean his daughter, Luada?"

Laughing Leo turned swiftly upon him, his face growing hard, his eyes glowing as he saw the excitement written upon that darkly-handsome countenance. He bowed, replying:

"I mean Miss Kirkendall, yes. She forms one of the party. Is there anything so very remarkable in the fact that a daughter should bear her father company on a short pleasure trip?"

"But—out here, in the wilds!" muttered Purchass, hardly conscious of his own words as he turned abruptly away to hide his telltale excitement.

Laughing Leo looked after him curiously, his upper lip beginning to curl, when Spread Eagle Sam interposed, to cover the indiscretion of his comrade.

"The boss is comin' to see us, you say?"

"Yes. He bade me seek you out, and tell you as much. He has his tents and all other conveniences with him, and so will not interfere with your arrangements. He wishes you to select a good camping-ground, somewhere near your own location, and to make all necessary arrangements before his coming, which will probably be about noon, to-morrow."

"I'll do the best I know how, sart'in; but, stranger, I'm monstrous sorry you didn't say this right out at fu'st. I'd give all I expect to airn this season, ruther than hev treated a fri'nd o' the ole man like we hev you!"

Laughing Leo laughed shortly, a trifle bitterly, then added:

"That need trouble you but little, my good fellow. Morris Kirkendall will hardly quarrel with you on that account, although he may regret your failing to break my back!"

"Yit he sent you here?" muttered Sam, perplexed.

"When he saw that I was resolved on coming, yes. And now that my mission is properly performed, allow me to speak of a little matter that concerns both you and me.

"You are surprised at the way I have acted. I took that course simply because I wanted to make sure you would listen to me when I delivered my challenge. As a simple messenger from a man who employed us both, I knew sufficient of your nature and character to feel sure you would laugh at my proposal. To prevent this, I have taken pains to show you I am as good a man, as a man, as any in your company."

Sam scratched his chin dubiously.

"Durned ef you ain't stirrin' up the mud so thick a ten-eyed man couldn't see the bottom!" he grunted, shortly.

"I will wager five hundred dollars in gold against your situation, that I am a better and more skillful hide-hunter than you are, Boss of the Buffalo Range though you call yourself," deliberately uttered Laughing Leo.

Spread Eagle Sam stared at him fixedly, a suspicious light deepening in his bloodshot eyes. Laughing Leo coolly added:

"If you win, the money is yours; if you lose, you are to abdicate, and I am to run this ranch. Do I put the case in language simple enough for your comprehension, my dear fellow? If not, I will pick my flint and try it again."

"The words is plain enough, but I cain't see through the reasons which orter lay ahind it," slowly replied Spread Eagle Sam, watching the stranger closely, dubiously. "What fer do you want to resk sech a pile o' money as that, when a dug-out is easy made an' they's range a-plenty fer all as chooses to hunt fer hides? That's the p'int as gits me wu'st!"

"Say it is a mere whim—say that I have more money than I well know what to do with, and that I wish to give you a portion of it—if you are smart and skillful enough to win it," was the light response.

"That ain't your reason, stranger," gravely retorted Sam. "They's somethin' you're keepin' onder kiver. Men don't throw away money in heaps like that 'less they think they kin git somethin' a heap better in pay fer it."

"My proposition is plain and simple enough, old man," a little impatiently. "You lay claim to the championship of the buffalo-range. Far and wide you are known as the boss hide-hunter. Men say your equal never lived, never will come to the front; but I take the liberty of doubting

the truth of your claims and of the depth of their judgment. I am ready to risk a fair sum of money against the empty title. Unless you are afraid to risk your uncontested laurels in a genuine contest, I can hardly see how you are going to get out of it."

"S'posen I won't hev nothin' to do with it—what then?"

"It is difficult to suppose any such action on your part, my good fellow," retorted Laughlin, with a laugh that was almost an insult. "You are proud of the reputation you have gained on the range; as you have a right to be, too. You are a man who would far rather be cheered than hissed. Now listen:

"I will repeat this challenge of mine in the presence of Morris Kirkendall and his fair daughter. I will tell them, as I now tell you, that I never in all my life fired a shot at a buffalo for his hide. I am an utter greenhorn as to the manner of professional hunting. But—I believe I can beat the champion hide-hunter at his own game. I am ready to put up a fit sum of money against his title, and leave Morris Kirkendall to decide which man wins.

"Those are the terms in which I will place my wishes before your employer to-morrow, Spread Eagle Sam. You can sleep on the matter, and give me your decision then."

With a low, mocking bow, Laughing Leo turned on his heel and strode out of the hut into the gathering darkness. He uttered a shrill whistle, and with a ringing neigh the black steed came galloping up to his side.

Spread Eagle Sam strode to the door, his brows corrugated and his eyes glowing, but he was too late for more than to see the audacious stranger leap into the saddle and dash at break-neck speed off into the night.

A light hand touched the huge hide-hunter on the shoulder, and Jesse Purchass pressed past him into the open air, with a keen glance into the face of his comrade that Spread Eagle readily interpreted.

The herculean hide-hunter hesitated a moment, then slowly complied with the silent request, passing out of the dug-out and following his *protege* down to the bank of the little creek, where they had twice held consultation that day.

"Your eyes said fer me to come, an' hyar I am, Jes'. It's about that pesky critter as jes' rid away you want to talk, I reckon?"

"Who is he, and what is his object in coming here, Sam?" hoarsely demanded the young hide-hunter.

"Who he is or what his name he never let on, as you know to the full as well as me, Jes'," was the deliberate reply. "As to the why he come, the ole man sent him, I reckon."

Purchass gripped his mentor tightly by the arm, his eyes glowing redly through the gloom. His voice was harsh and unnatural as he spoke again:

"More than that, Sam! If he was only a messenger from him, I would never think twice about it; but he's more than that. He's in love with her—with my love!"

"That's on'y a guess, Jes', an' one that may be miles off from the center. He didn't say so."

"You remember our talk to-day, Sam? You remember what I told you the old man said! For me to go out on the range and make a record to equal yours, before talking to him again of loving his daughter?"

"I ain't fergot, Jes'. Them was the words, nighabout."

"And now he comes here to rival you—to beat your record, Sam! He comes from the same quarter, with the very same end in view that brought me here. Sam, that laughing devil is in love with Luada. He has told her or her father of it. The old man has held out hopes, if he can come up to his foolish, crack-brained ideal. For that reason alone he has come here and flung that challenge in your teeth!"

"Ef I don't take it up, lad? He cain't beat me, then," slowly uttered Spread Eagle; but in the darkness a flush came into his face and told how hard it was for him to utter those words.

"Then he would shame you before them both, even as he threatened to do. No, Sam. You must accept the offer. I will put up the money on you—for we won't give the laughing devil one inch the best of the fight, even in seeming. You can beat him—you must beat him!"

Greatly relieved by this outburst, for the simple fellow really believed his *protege* would urge him to evade the contest on which so much depended, Sam laughed lightly.

"Ef you say so, lad, I'll do the best I know. When it gits down to business on the range—jufpin' an' dancin' an' shovin' out them ingyne arms o' his'n ain't what'll win the hides. He kivered me all over with one kind o' science to-day; maybe I kin give him a wrinkle o' two of a different sort when it comes down to the shootin' straight an' fast."

"Don't underrate him, Sam. He's a devil all through, and may be as good at that as with his hands. But you must beat him, or—"

"I will ef it's on the keerds, lad; but if I slip up?"

"Then I'll try another shot, if I hang for it!" savagely.

CHAPTER XI.

SAM AS CUPID'S ADJUTANT.

THE hide-hunters were at work bright and early the next morning, selecting a picturesque as well as convenient camp for the expected visitors. This spot was found at no great distance from the dug-out, up on the higher ground, where a broad plateau-like stretch, level as a floor, extended along the range of hills like a horizontal belt.

The timber supply was scanty, but amply sufficient for all purposes; water was not far distant; a widely extended view was furnished; and if the party was not wholly satisfied with the location, Spread Eagle Sam delicately hinted that they might hunt up other servants as soon as they liked.

Spots were marked out for the tents, and dry bunch-grass gathered in abundance for carpeting them. Shelters were put up for the stock, and long before the party made its appearance along the line of broken ground, all preliminaries were completed, and Spread Eagle had drawn Jesse Purchass aside for a confidential talk.

"It's the fu'st licks as counts up the biggest, Jes', with wimmen critters as well as with men. You see the muss, yest'day. You see that lightnin' critter smack my chops, both to once. They wouldn't 'a' mashed a 'skeeter, sca'cely, fer weight; an' yit it was them as licked me! On'y fer them, I do reckon I mought 'a' got in on the jumpin' critter; an' once in my grip, he was gone up, sure!"

Sam gazed soberly over the range in the direction from whence the party were expected. Jesse said nothing. His dark face was hard-set and gloomy. Evidently he felt small hopes for the future.

"Them slaps putt blood into my eyes, an' I went at him head down an' tail up—jest what the critter wanted! I was blind afore he hit a raal lick. An' that's why I say, lad, you want to git in the fu'st licks, an' putt them in the right spot.

"Not on the stranger, nur yit the ole man, but little Lu's the mark for ye to shoot at fu'st."

"It's over a year since I saw her, Sam," gloomily muttered Purchass. "Even then she wouldn't give me a certain promise. She hadn't seen that dandy devil, then. He may have had the whole of this last year in which to rub out my picture. She may have given him the place I hoped to fill. If so—"

"Ef so, you want to find it out jes' as soon's the law lows ye, lad," was the sharp interpolation. "Fer that reason I'm talkin' to ye now. You say the old man don't know you're here with us?"

"Not unless that laughing devil told him."

"I don't reckon he thunk anythin' 'bout it, lad; anyway, we'll play he didn't ontel we see he did. You'll lay low an' keep shady, watchin' fer my sign. I'll see that the ole man nur yit the young feller don't pushin' onto ye, ef you kin ketch the little darlin' 'way from her dad."

"If you could give her a note," hesitated Purchass.

"Why not?" laughed Sam, plainly taking a huge delight in his novel occupation. "Ain't I big enough fer a hull post-orifice? Jes' you git the talkin' paper ready, an' then lay low."

Jesse Purchass impulsively caught the hand of the huge hide-hunter, and actually lifted it to his lips, his dark eyes moist, his lips quivering as he muttered:

"I can't thank you, Sam, for the right words won't come; but the hope you have given me has carried me nearer heaven and further from hell than I have been for many a long day!"

"A pard's a pard, lad, an' that word means helpin' each other. I know the little lady is too good fer any common man, but ef it comes to a race 'twixt you an' that laughin' critter, stan's to reason I'll do the best I know to fetch you in ahead. Not beca'se he licked me, though! I don't hold no grudge fer that. He did it fa'r an' squar'. But a pard's a pard, an'—Jes', ef the little gal is agreeable, an' the ole man kicks up rusty, why—you're a pesky fool an' a double-distilled ejot from Crazyville ef you don't take her in your arms, straddle your critter an' hunt up a preacher-man as fast as the good Lawd 'll let ye—so thar!"

It was high noon when the expected company put in an appearance, and the sun was rapidly declining before the camp was fairly pitched and every thing straightened up. Spread Eagle Sam was one of the busiest while work remained to be done, and had time but for the briefest of greetings with his employer and his charming daughter.

Lovely Leo was with the party, gay as a butterfly and almost as gaudy in hue. Still a dandy, but now after the prairie fashion, with a decided leaning toward the barbaric.

He was rigged out in buckskin from head to foot, save in his head-gear. The material was Indian-tanned, of a light golden yellow, soft as velvet itself, and to all appearance was now donned for the first time in public. In the rays of the afternoon sun he flashed and sparkled dazzlingly, such masses of beads and gayly colored quills and bright-hued silks covered his person from throat to soles.

About his trim, muscular waist was a broad band of stiffened buckskin, ornamented like the rest. It upheld a brace of heavy revolvers and a long, doubled-edged knife, all of which were richly ornamented and of the finest workmanship. And when he made his appearance with a plain-looking, but finely-finished rifle of the same make as that by which he swore—the one by which many an old hunter swears, even to this day, the "Old Reliable" Sharpe—Spread Eagle Sam knew that this laughing, enigmatical stranger "meant business clear through!"

By watching his chance, Sam contrived to deliver the note left with him by Jesse Purchass, and though the huge hide-hunter was careful to veil his curiosity, from one corner of his eye he noted the warm flush which overspread her face, and he chuckled within himself as he moved briskly away to arrange some unimportant affair.

"She hain't fergot—the little chicky-biddy!" he muttered to himself, inwardly laughing heartily. "The way the red flag come into her pritty face telled that mighty plain. Jes' ag'in' the laughin' critter, fer all the world with the moon an' stars throwed in!"

For all he was so busily engaged, Sam managed to keep an eye on Luada until he saw her leave the camp, passing from sight without attracting any particular notice, so far as the big hide-hunter could determine. Then, to keep his portion of the agreement made with his *protege*, Spread Eagle Sam drew near to where Morris Kirkendall was slowly stumping his way back and forth, smoking a pipe of Indian stone, evidently in a state of perfect content with himself, if not with all of the people around him.

There was a malicious twinkle in his gray eyes as Sam approached, and from the way his under lip protruded, the big hide-hunter knew his disfigured countenance had not entirely escaped observation.

Knowing as he did the grim sarcasm for which the old trader was noted, it was like walking unarmed to the mouth of a loaded cannon, but Spread Eagle remembered his own wise advice to Jesse Purchass of a few hours before, and struck the first blow, straight from the shoulder.

"The orders you sent me is all kerried out, Mr. Morris Kirkendall," he said, sharply, with just the shadow of a bow, loftily overlooking the hand which the trader extended at his approach. "Ef they ain't done up 'cordin' to your likin', putt the blame onto your own shoulders, fer axin' a pore, wu'thless, no-count devil to work fer ye—like me!"

Morris Kirkendall actually dropped his cherished pipe from between his jaws in his amazement at this totally unexpected address. His gray eyes stared in doubt, wide open.

Sam clicked his teeth sharply together to choke off the laugh that rose in his throat, and abruptly changed his mode of attack, to still further bewilder his adversary.

"I'm as low-down an' humble a critter as the good Lawd ever wasted time in makin', Morris Kirkendall, but they's some things even a root-eater cain't climb over 'though gittin' his hide scratched down to the quick."

"What's the matter now, man alive?" spluttered the trader.

"Who be I, anyway? A digger Injun? A squaw-man? A broken-down critter, 'thout tooth, eye or hand? Or be I Spread Eagle Sam, the Boss of the Buffler Range? Tell me that?"

"Unless you are drunk, I should say you was Spread Eagle," Kirkendall replied, still at a loss to divine the other's meaning. "What the deuce has got into your boots, anyway?"

"Yes, sir, I am Spread Eagle Sam!" and the huge hide-hunter drew his magnificent figure rigidly erect. "I kin jump higher an' stay up longer—kin out-run, yell, eat, drink, fight or love ary other critter as ever drawed the breath o' life! I kin shoot less an' take more hides—I kin drap a bull in his tracks so fur off that the lead'll grow gray headed a year afore it ketches up with the critter! I kin surround a gang o' buffler an' take twicet the number o' hides that they is heads in the bunch! I kin throw away my tools, an' when the herd ketches the wind o' Spread Eagle Sam, they jes' strip off thar winter kiverin', an' on thar knees beg the Boss o' the Range to credit 'em with so much."

"You're a good man, Sam, and can spit out more gas than ary other critter I know," dryly commented Kirkendall, as the big hide-hunter paused to catch breath.

"I ain't no slouch when it comes to takin' hides, be I?"

"You're as good as the best, Sam."

"I knows my business, don't I?"

"No man livin' knows it better, old fellow."

"Did I ever try to cheat ye in count or quality? Did I ever throw dirt onto ye, an' then rub it in with sandpaper? Did I ever treat you or yourn any way 'cept white from the word go? Did I, now?"

"What has got into you, anyway, Sam Ingalls?" irritably cried the trader, his eyes beginnin' to glitter and snap. "You say you ain't drunk, but you act like you was!"

"It's grief—clean sorrer, boss," and Sam shook his head gloomily, a reproachful light in his big blue eyes that was not all assumed.

"What hev I did that you cain't trust me no longer? An' ef you wanted me to skin out, why didn't you come out flat-footed an' say so, 'stead o' sendin' that over-ripe squirt to try an' scrounge me out o' my place?"

Morris Kirkendall began to smile, like one who sees the dense fog lifting and dry land close before him. He peered maliciously through his shaggy brows, noting the many-hued bruises and contusions which ornamented the face of the big hide-hunter. And then, in a mock-anxious tone, he asked:

"What on airth! Sam, you've bin foolin' with a bal'-horns' nest, an' I know it!"

Spread Eagle flushed hotly, for there was something in the old man's tones that awakened his suspicions.

"What's that critter bin tellin' ye, 'bout me?" he savagely demanded, his mighty fists clinching tightly.

"Never a word, 'cept that he'd give you the word I sent; that I was comin' fer a little taste o' the old life."

"Then he didn't say nothin' 'bout how we skeered his ha'r right up on eend? Nothin' 'bout no row that come of it?"

"I tell ye no, man! Did ye trick him? Was thar a fuss? How did the critter pan out, anyway?" eagerly questioned the veteran, as full of life and fond of excitement as ever.

"Pan out? Mortal man never see'd the like!" solemnly exclaimed Sam, determined to make a clean breast of it, since Leo Laughlin had acted so generously. "He went in only a handful o' pay dirt, but I'm a howlin' liar from afore the flood, ef he didn't come out a hull mount'in, an' every grain pure gold!"

"You didn't make much out of the lad, then?"

Spread Eagle felt a little pang of regret for his *protege* as he saw how brightly the eyes of the trader gleamed and noted the eagerness of his voice. So much interest in the exploits of a rival was not encouraging.

Still, he was too honest and true-hearted to either lie or cover up the good qualities of that rival, and he spoke frankly, even enthusiastically.

"Boss, he's a holy hummer from Topville! He looked like a gingerbread man, jes' come out of the bake-oven, so soft that you could run your little finger clean through him an' never know you was punchin' more'n wind, ef your eyes was shet. But when we come to crowd him—git out cyclones soaked in lightnin' an' sprinkled over with strychnine!"

"A hard horse to curry, was he, Sam?" chuckled Kirkendall, rubbing his hands together, punching a deep hole in the ground with his wooden leg. "Made you plenty o' fun I reckon?"

"Don't the mug o' me look like I'd hed fun in gobs an' more of it?" grinned Sam, half-sleepishly.

In his excitement, Morris Kirkendall now began to move restlessly, and as he showed an inclination to take the same direction in which, an hour or more before, Sam had seen Luada steal away, the big hide-hunter caught his arm and wheeled him about, talking nervously while walking him in the opposite direction.

"A hard hoss? Jes' one? Boss, he's the biggest herd o' rarin' kickin' buckin' bronchos that ever run the perayrie! Kerries a pile-driver up each shirt sleeve, run by steam! He kin rent out his han's a double-power cider-mills! Ef ever he was anythin' but a full-grown man, I'm open to bet his nuss was bottled chain-lightnin'!"

"And he licked you, Sam?" chuckled Kirkendall.

"Waal, not to say jes' *licked*, ye see, boss," stammered the big-hearted hide-hunter, loth to admit the truth, yet unwilling to lie about it.

"But you didn't lick *him*?" persisted the veteran.

"No; I cain't say as that was it, nuther. Ye see—*The good Lawd!*"

Their walk had carried them far enough from the camp to open up a new view beyond a line of short brush, and to his dismay Spread Eagle Sam caught sight of two figures seated close together under the shadow of the towering rocks. It needed not a second glance to tell him who they were, and in his desperation he pushed in front of the veteran and strove to turn him around before he also made the discovery.

But Morris Kirkendall was stubborn as he was suspicious, and this abrupt change in the manner of his companion awakened all of his curiosity.

"What's the matter with you, Sam?" he irritably exclaimed, as he resisted the pressure. "You act like a crazy critter to-day, an' I don't—Hellow, who's that over yonder?"

Despite Sam's efforts, the old man caught a glimpse of the unsuspecting couple, and blurted out his surprise.

Sam caught a glimpse of Laughing Leo approaching them from the direction of the camp, and as his last chance, cried:

"Talk o' the devil—an' yender he comes, boss! Wants to see you, I reckon. Better come an' see what he wants, hedn't ye? Mebbe it's somethin'—"

"Durn *him*!" bluntly uttered the old man, moving his head rapidly from side to side in order to get a better view of the couple beyond,

while Sam tried to keep his broad figure between his eyes and them. "Durn *you*, too, Sam Ingalls! git out o' my light or I'll—Bless my ole sole! Ef it ain't—They ain't ary other petticut in these parts! Ef it ain't my Beauty-bird, I'm a liar! Got somebody with her—but *who*? Sam, you dodgin' critter, ef you don't git out o' my light, I'll punch a hole clean through your lubberly karkidge—so thar!"

Sam knew that the harm was done, and stepped aside so abruptly that the old man came near falling, only saving himself by catching hold of the big hide-hunter. This brought him with his face the other way, facing Laughing Leo, who said:

"Mr. Ingalls, will you be kind enough to inform me where I can find your partner, Jesse Purchass?"

Spread Eagle gave a grunt of utter disgust. Kirkendall ripped out a sonorous oath, and wheeled toward the couple who still sat in blissful ignorance of the impending storm.

"The devil! Don't like him—face of that she-wolf!" he spluttered, then thundered: "You, Luada! come here, you witch!"

CHAPTER XII.

"LOVE NOT ALL A BLISSFUL DREAM."

LUADA KIRKENDALL had proved herself an actress of no mean merit since she bade a temporary adieu to St. Paul. She knew that were Morris Kirkendall to entertain the faintest suspicion that Jesse Purchass formed one of the family of Spread Eagle Sam, he would no sooner take her there than he would thrust her into the den of a hungry grizzly bear.

On several occasions, when there seemed a probability of the weather changing to actual winter, the old trader would have turned about and retraced his steps, dearly as he longed to once again draw a free breath on his beloved buffalo-range, but as often would Luada coax and persuade him to keep on.

She had to manage this without awakening his suspicious nature—no easy task—to a belief that she was unduly anxious to reach the rendezvous. She had to guard against the fierce outburst which she knew would sweep all before it, the instant Morris Kirkendall discovered how thoroughly he had been duped, how much pains he had taken to bring together the twain he had furiously sworn should never be one.

Yet, with all her eagerness to reach the rendezvous presided over by Spread Eagle Sam, Luada would not admit, even to herself, in her most sentimental moments, that she was in love with Jesse Purchass, Laughing Leo, or any other man. And even when her heart sunk heavy as lead in her bosom that bright November day when the camp was reached, and among the rough-clad hide-hunters who came forward to welcome them, she failed to recognize the well-remembered figure with its darkly handsome face, its jetty eyes, so changeable, yet ever filled with a warm light that spoke plainer and sweeter than mortal tongue; even then the maiden would not acknowledge the fact.

In those by-gone days when Jesse Purchass humbly served behind the counters of the eccentric trader, his silent devotion, his evident thankfulness for her slightest smile, his utter freedom from all presumption, added to his darkly romantic beauty of face and person, first warned Luada of her peril; but proud of her own powers, Luada resolved to prove his the danger, his the weakness and folly, not hers. And so it came to pass that they were much together, intimate friends and good comrades, if not lovers, when Morris Kirkendall opened his eyes to the disagreeable fact of his Beauty-bird being no longer a child.

There was a stormy scene between him and his clerk, the details of which Luada shortly learned from her favorite maid, a half-breed girl. She learned that Jesse Purchass boldly avowed his love for her, asking that she be given to him in marriage, the result being as detailed by Jesse himself to the giant hide-hunter.

Jesse Purchass vanished that same night, but a letter from him reached Luada the next day. It told her all that had happened; it told her how madly, passionately he loved her; told her that if she denied him, death alone should be his bride; with much more of greater interest to Luada and himself, than to the present company.

He declared that he would take Morris Kirkendall at his word, and after preparing himself for the ordeal, would hunt up Spread Eagle Sam and strive to make a record at which not even the proud father could laugh or jeer. Then—he would come to Luada first, for his reward. If she still remained obdurate, welcome come death!

Bombastic, exaggerated, as the generality of lovers' letters are very apt to prove on analysis; but Luada had never forgotten the impassioned vows therein, and, though she was so certain she regarded Jesse Purchass only as a friend, she still carried that letter somewhere about her person night and day.

It lay close above her heart as her shy gaze wandered over the bronzed faces of the hide-hunters who advanced to meet and welcome them; as she moved nervously about the camp while the tents were being pitched, starting at every footstep and each strange voice that met

her ears; and from a heavy, crushing weight that almost checked the pulsations of her heart, it became lighter than down when Spread Eagle Sam so deftly left that bit of a note in her trembling palm!

Fearful lest her burning cheeks betray her, Luada stole away to the seclusion of her own tent, then read the contents of the note. The words were not many, but they were enough.

Jesse Purchass was near at hand, and passionately beseeched her to grant him a brief interview before he discovered himself to Morris Kirkendall. He had so much to tell her—so much that intimately concerned them both. Come—if she would not doom a poor, hopeless wretch to even worse misery than he had for one whole year endured!

Luada did not pause to ask, much less convince herself, that the wild throbbing of her heart, the joyous bounding of the warm blood through her veins, came simply from a platonic source, merely because a long absent acquaintance was within easy calling distance. She hid the note in her bosom and stole out of camp, taking the opposite direction from the one where Jesse Purchass said he would be waiting and watching for her coming.

As already noted, her action created no comment, if observed by any other than Spread Eagle Sam; and having gained her first point, Luada hastened through the winding defiles and broken ground until—a low, passionate cry met her ears as a manly figure leaped from cover, and—

After all, Luada was not much to blame, though her cheeks glowed and tingled as though long exposed to a scorching fire, and her large, dewy eyes persistently refused to meet the eager, burning gaze of the handsome young hide-hunter.

If a man *will* act like one possessed—if he *will* leap out from a cunning ambush, startling a poor girl so she cannot even utter his name in a whisper, much less scream loud enough to alarm the camp nearly half a mile distant—if he *will* catch and smother her in his mighty grasp, rumple her waist, crush her collar and muss her hair, while performing other mad exploits more readily imagined than described in detail—surely the blame should fall upon *his* shoulders, since he has so richly paid himself in advance!

Half an hour later, the young couple were acting after a much saner fashion, seated side by side under the shadow of a towering rock, lost to all around them save as those surroundings affected their future.

Jesse looked very odd to Luada, now that she had regained enough of her wonted spirit and composure to look him fairly in the face. His skin was so bronzed, his garb so rude and different from any which she had ever seen him wear before, that she seemed almost in doubt as to whether this could be the neatly dressed clerk who had first—

"Awakened my friendship, I meant, not—not *that*!" Luada pouted, as the young hide-hunter prompted her hesitating lips.

It was foolish, perhaps, after the proofs she had given him, but at those words the briefly forgotten jealousy flamed up anew, and a cloud swept over the face of the lover.

"It must be love, or nothing, Luada!" he said, his black and glittering eyes watching her every change almost fiercely. "The day has past when mere friendship could satisfy my heart. If I cannot be first, I will be nothing."

Luada tried to look surprised, tried to frown and draw her trim little figure up haughtily; but with a lamentable lack of success. She was pleased, not offended, by this outburst of jealousy, and instead of losing ground, as he should have done, in common justice, Jesse won still nearer to her.

He was too deeply in love to see this, just then, and as his old fears and doubts returned, Purchass almost timidly stole one arm about her slender waist, his voice low, pleading, his eyes filled with an anxious prayer, his face pale and bearing an expression that told how terribly in earnest he was.

"Forgive me, Luada, but if you only knew—if you could only realize how much this means to me! It is more than life. It means Heaven or Hades with me!"

"Don't—you frighten me!" she murmured, shrinking from his embrace, trembling a little as she glanced shyly into his glowing eyes.

With an effort of will that proved his strength, Jesse removed his arm and drew a little apart. But the vivid glow never left his eyes, while his voice was even more earnest than at first as he spoke again:

"Your slightest word is religious law to me, little one. I will be silent if you wish, but if I am to speak, it must be of the hopes and fears which fill my heart to overflowing."

"I don't mean—but you seemed so terribly in earnest that you frightened me!" murmured Luada faintly.

"I am in earnest, Luada," he said, partially succeeding in his effort to control his mad passions. "My life for the past year is evidence of that earnestness. You have not forgotten the day I left your father's service?"

A swift, shy glance answered him with sufficient plainness.

"I wrote to you then, telling you of my love, my hopes, my plans for the future. I told you how bitterly your father taunted me then; how he called me a weakling, a do-nothing, a walking tailor's sign, the mere ghost of a man. He held up his pet, Spread Eagle Sam, as a model of what a true man should be. He laughed in bitter scorn as he bade me go and take him for an example. He said that when I could stand alongside Spread Eagle Sam without a blush for my miserable weakness, then, and not until then, I might tell him of my love for you."

"He is so strange, so set in his ways," murmured Luada; but with true fidelity she added: "Yet he means well. It is his great love for me, his only child, that leads him to look with suspicion on all who may—who seem likely to—You know, Jesse!"

"To fall in love with his precious treasure," and somehow the slight distance which divided them grew less, while her graceful form was supported by a strong arm, instead of the cold, insensible rock as a moment before. "If he looked on all men with the same eyes—but does he, darling?"

It was the old green-eyed monster again showing its head.

"I don't understand you, Jesse," she faltered.

He frowned slightly, but resolved not to press the dangerous question just then. He spoke rapidly:

"So bitter, so stinging were his taunts, that I answered him almost as I would have answered one of my own age; not quite, for I still remembered that he was your father. I told him I came of as good and high a family as his own. That I stood quite ready to prove myself as good a man as the best he could pick out in all the world."

"He once more flung Spread Eagle Sam at my head, and in my madness I told him that I would make a record equal to that of his demigod, or leave my bones to the coyotes!"

"I left the house, and sent you that note of explanation. I left the city, and went back to my old home. I knew nothing of fire-arms—up to that day I had never even fired off a pistol—but I felt that what man had done, that could I do, urged on by my love for you, and the hope of one day winning you for a wife!"

"It was hard and discouraging work at first, but the thoughts of a future reward lent me courage and perseverance, and I never faltered until I believed I could hold my own even in competition with Spread Eagle Sam, so far as skill with the tools of his craft were concerned.

"I came out here, and found him. I did not tell him of my hopes or purposes, but I managed to interest him in myself, and he took me as one of his men; more as a friend, however, than as a regular employe."

"But he knows—he gave me your note," hesitated Luada.

"He surprised my secret yesterday, and—" She drew away from him with a haughty gesture of surprise and even indignation, her eyes flashing fire, her face flushing vividly. She would have risen to her feet, but for his gently-restraining grasp, his imploring gaze, his hasty words:

"It was weak and ungenerous, I admit, Luada, but let me explain. He was about to drive me away from him, thinking I was not strong enough to endure the hardships of a hide-hunter's winter. In my despair, I let words drop that gave him light, for you know how thoroughly he is acquainted with your father. He knew that I had been in his employ—you remember the time I saved him from robbery, if not death, at the hands of that gang of thugs. He put the two things together, and flatly charged me with seeking to make a record to satisfy the whims of your father. Then—what could I do? I was wretchedly miserable. I had heard nothing from or of you for more than a year. I remembered your loveliness, your irresistible charms—I knew not but what you had forgotten my very existence. You might even then be a wife!"

It was a wild, incoherent defense, but his manner, rather than his words, won his pardon. And Luada no longer sought to flee, though her cheeks glowed more vividly than ever.

"I admitted my love for you, Luada, but I was careful even in my madness not to implicate you by word or inference. I told him no word of love had ever passed between us. I said that you knew nothing of my insane hopes, beyond the simple fact that I intended to make a record for your father. And the generous fellow of his own free will, promised to lend me all the aid he could. And when he heard that you were coming here to-day, he said that he would gain me an interview with you before my presence became known to your father. To spare you all I could, I gave him that note."

"I am not angry," she slowly responded. "But it startled me at first. It is all so new—so strange—and I feared he might think that we were—that is—"

"Lovers?" whispered Jesse, drawing her closer to his side. "Is it such a terrible word to utter, darling? It would make my heart bubble over with joy just to hear you breathe it!"

He seemed so meek, so humble, even in his

burning passion, that a faint spice of her usual coquettishness returned to Luada, and with a saucy smile she retorted:

"Even if I had to breathe a falsehood with it, Mr. Purchass?"

The change that came over his face was so sudden and complete that it frightened her. All the old jealousy flamed up with redoubled intensity, and his voice was harsh as he said:

"Would the answer come easier had *he* put the question, Luada? Would there be a lie in it for that laughing devil?"

"You seem bent on having a quarrel, Mr. Purchass," she said, with a cold dignity that effectually abashed him. "I will bid you good-day, until you are in your sober senses."

She strove to arise, but he would not permit it. He saw how cruelly he had wounded her trust, but as it was too late to think of his folly, he resolved to have the point that rankled so bitterly in his heart, settled once for all.

"I beg your pardon for my hasty speech, Luada," he said, with difficulty making his tones steady. "I was a brute to speak in that way, but I have at least a shadow of an excuse."

"I can imagine none, whatever," she said, coldly.

"First, tell me this: If I gain your father's consent to plead my suit with you, what would your answer be?"

"You have no right to ask me any such question, now."

"If another was to advance the same claims—if that laughing dandy were to perform the same deeds, and ask the same reward—if we both stood before you at the same time—which one would you smile brightest upon, Luada?"

It was a harder, more ungenerous question than the other, and the jealous lover saw how rapidly he was losing ground as he saw her lip quiver, her face grow pale and proud. In his madness he believed that her silence rose from a preference for Laughing Leo, and with a hard laugh he released her.

This was the wisest move he could have made, just then. No longer restrained by force, Luada showed no inclination to flee. Instead, she met his gaze firmly, speaking steadily:

"Will you kindly explain the meaning of your very peculiar words and actions, Mr. Purchass?"

"If you will answer my questions as frankly as they are put, Luada," he said hurriedly.

"I make no promises blindly, Mr. Purchass," she said, a little stiffly. "If you have no more to say, I will go."

"Luada, who is that laughing demon? What is the meaning of this whim of his? What led him to making such a mad bet with Spread Eagle Sam? Has it anything to do with you?"

A soft flush suffused her cheeks, and for a moment her dark eyes sought the ground. But then she met his burning gaze frankly, half-smiling as she made reply:

"Father told him much the same thing he did you, I believe. I suppose *he* has determined to make a 'record,' also."

"And he has your good wishes, Miss Kir kendall?"

Luada grew grave, and a troubled light came into her dark eyes. She gazed vacantly over the distant plain, and seemingly did not notice the formal title he gave to her. She spoke slowly, uncertainly, almost like one in a dream:

"I wish I could satisfy myself! I want to say no, but I cannot! When I am out of his sight, I sometimes believe I hate and detest him with all my soul! But when I see him—when he is near me, even, though out of sight—I almost feel that he is my master! He exerts such a peculiar influence over my mind—it seems like witchcraft!"

"In other words, you love him!" bitterly muttered Jesse.

"Do I?" softly replied, rather than questioned Luada. "I can hardly believe that—and yet—it may be!"

Jesse Purchass took her hands in both of his, pressing them hardly, forcing her eyes to meet his burning orbs. His face was pale as death, drawn and haggard. He was suffering tortures such as only fiery, passionate natures as his can suffer and still live.

"Luada, if you love him you kill me, body and soul! Can you guess what that means?"

She shivered and tried to withdraw her hands, but he held them tightly, smiling despite his inward pain as he added in a more natural tone:

"Listen to me, little one: That laughing demon came to us yesterday, and cast insult after insult in our faces. He made a particular set at Spread Eagle Sam, and though the grand old fellow would not touch him while he was eating our bread and sheltered by our roof, the moment he left its protection, Sam tried to punish him—tried, and failed!"

His teeth came together with a vicious click as he saw the bright light springing into her eyes. She seemed to take pleasure in the thought of the giant's discomfiture.

"He told Sam that he meant to drive him out of his position. He dared to wager that position against a sum of money, the result to be decided by a trial at killing buffaloes. He said that if Sam declined to accept, he would repeat the challenge before you and your father, and

thus shame him into accepting the bet. And saying this, he leaped upon his horse and rode away."

He ceased speaking, but Luada remained silent.

"You know his object, Luada. Will he succeed *with you?*"

"No—and yet—if he should win this match—if he should satisfy father, and press his suit; if father should favor him and bid me marry him, I—"

"You would refuse! You love me! You dare not deny it, my precious, my all!" hoarsely muttered Jesse, fairly beside himself with fear and despair at her strange words.

A faint smile came into her pale face, and she gazed into his eyes, her own shining brightly as she murmured:

"I believe I do—I *think* I love you Jesse! But—if he *was* to win, and father bade me marry him, I fear I could not refuse. He has such a strange, wonderful power over me!"

Jesse Purchass hardly realized the value of her sweet, yet doubting confession, so intense was his feeling at the picture thus conjured up by the trembling girl.

"It shall never come to that, little one!" he muttered, his voice hard and strained. "Rather than that—rather than see even your father force your inclinations, I would—"

At that moment the harsh voice of Morris Kirkendall calling to Luada and bidding her come to him instantly, startled them, and the fierce sentence was left incomplete.

Luada glanced hurriedly in the direction from whence came that stern command, and uttered a little cry of vexation and alarm as she recognized her parent, stamping fiercely with his wooden leg, shaking a clinched fist toward them, while Sam Ingalls forcibly restrained him from stumping toward them. She rose hastily to her feet, as did Jesse Purchass. She whispered in pleading accents:

"Do not face him now, dear Jesse. He is so hot-tempered, you so high-spirited, that there would be sure to be a worse quarrel than ever! Say you will keep out of his way until I can smooth matters over? *For my sake, Jesse!*"

"For your sake, then," he reluctantly consented.

"You Luada!" roared Morris Kirkendall, once more. "Ef you don't run from that pizen she-wolf's cub, I'll be the death o' ye both—so *thar!*"

"Remember, dear—if the match *is* made, *he must not win!*" she cast earnestly over her shoulder as she fled from the spot.

"I'll defeat him, by fair means or by foul!" fiercely replied Purchass, his black eyes flashing a vengeful, threatening glance toward the gayly-bedecked figure of Laughing Leo.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BRIDE IN THE BALANCE.

Of course Morris Kirkendall could hear nothing of all this, but he could see that his only daughter seemed in no extravagant haste to obey his harsh summons; that she had been in close and friendly conversation with one on whom he had placed his ban—"the pesky critter that minded him o' the face o' that cussed she-wolf!"

He saw her move toward him, but alone. Jesse Purchass stood with folded arms watching the maiden, but showing no signs of taking the same course. On the contrary, he was turning on his heel as though to beat a retreat, the moment after Luada reached her parent and greeted him lowly:

"You called me, father, and I am here."

"Plenty time, too, I should say!" he growled, knitting his shaggy brows ferociously. "Who was that critter with ye?"

The glittering gray eyes flashed from her flushed face back to the shadow of the towering rock, and as he saw Jesse Purchass moving away at a fair pace, he cried sharply:

"I say, *you!* Come back here! What d'ye mean by tryin' to sneak off in such a fashion like that? Body'd think ye'd bin ketched suckin' aigs ag'in' the law! Come back, twice!"

There was an insolence in his tones beyond what mortal man might bear unmoved, and the young hide-hunter turned in that direction, making a swift gesture the exact meaning of which none who saw it could give save Luada. She knew it was a silent appeal to her to release him from the promise she had exacted; a prayer that she would permit him to face her irate parent in manly fashion, instead of stealing away in the face of such bitter taunts.

For a moment she hesitated, fearing for the results when two such hot and ungovernable tempers should come together; but not for long. Her native courage returned to her, and she knew she could prevent matters from going too far. Besides, since an explanation must come sooner or later, as well have it over with now.

And Jesse Purchass saw her give him permission to defend himself, with a movement of her hand.

The instant Spread Eagle Sam saw that his young protege realized the situation, he released his firm grip on Morris Kirkendall and fell back a pace or two, honestly embarrassed and at a loss what to do. There was a light

touch on his arm, and he turned to see Laughing Leo, who hurriedly whispered:

"You and I are just two too many for this little conference, my dear fellow. Suppose we beat a retreat?"

Sam hesitated, not through any love of a scene like this promised to be, but because he feared one or both of his friends might permit hot passion to carry them too far, unless some one was nigh to put in a soothing word at the right time.

His doubts were decided by Morris Kirkendall himself, whose keen ears had caught the words of Laughing Leo, and who harshly flung over his shoulder at them:

"You critters hold your ground! Be I a dose o' strychnine, that the hull kit an' caboodle wants to run away?"

The herculean hide-hunter tried to catch the eye of Luada, in hopes of learning her wishes, but they were kept persistently upon the ground at her feet. The flush had faded from her cheeks, leaving them paler far than usual. Her red lips were tightly compressed, her hands closed together, and in spite of her humble attitude, Laughing Leo knew that she was nervously preparing herself to play her part in the coming scene without flinching.

Morris Kirkendall stared insolently at the young hide-hunter as he advanced, and when Jesse stood before him, pale but resolute, he slowly scanned him from sole to crown, then reversed the process before he deigned to speak.

"Waal, it *is* you, ain't it?" he at length uttered, his under lip protruding, his shaggy brows lowering until they formed a hairy vail through which the little gray eyes gleamed and sparkled maliciously.

"At your service, Mr. Kirkendall," and Jesse bowed, stiffly.

"No you ain't, nuther! Once you was my servant—an' a monstrous poor excuse fer one at that! But I liked your looks a heap sight better then then I do now. You showed out your raal colors, then. Anybody could see with hafe a eye you was a half-baked counter-jumper; but now—what business hev you got with the rig of a man onto ye, critter?"

Brutal though his words were, his manner and looks conveyed still deeper insult, and only for the presence of Luada, Purchass could hardly have held his fierce resentment in check for an instant. As it was, his face grew pale as that of a corpse, his dark eyes fairly flashing fire as he uttered in a strained, unnatural voice:

"Since I am no longer in your employ, Morris Kirkendall, it can matter little to you the manner of garb I wear. As for your slurs against my manhood, if you have any friend whose age and white hairs do not disarm resentment, and you can induce him or them to repeat your words as his or their own, I will answer them as I dare not answer *you*, an old man—and *her father!*"

"Good lad, Jes'!" muttered Spread Eagle Sam nodding emphatically his approval, with a defiant glance toward Laughlin.

Even his best friends were often surprised by the whims and abrupt changes displayed by Morris Kirkendall. Now, instead of taking offense at this labored retort, he grinned and actually nodded his head approvingly!

"See how jes' puttin' on the rig of a white man 'proves even a weak, shifless critter like you be! But you better go take it off, boy, 'fore it strikes in an' proves too hefty a load fer you to tote. You cain't hide the bray nur yit the fly-flippers ef you do crawl into the lion's hide!"

If anything, this patronizing, mock-solicitous tone was even harder to face than the open insult, especially when he saw his rival in love standing quietly, smilingly by, an attentive listener to all that was uttered. It was well for Morris Kirkendall that Luada stood beside him, in those mad moments.

"Once more, sir, I beg leave to tell you that, having left your employ, it is no longer your privilege to say what I shall or shall not do. This is a free country. We stand on Government land, to which I have full as much right as even you. I can go and come as I choose, without first asking your high and mighty permission."

"Nur I hain't got no right to open my head when I ketch you sparkin' my gal, hev I?" snapped the trader.

"Father! you forget—"

"Beauty-bird, hold your hush! Ef he wasn't sparkin' you, what was he doin' so close up to ye. I'd admire to know?"

He wheeled quickly upon Sam Ingalls, snapping out:

"I ax you, Spread Eagle, as the only sensible one in the crowd, leavin' me out, what does all this stuff mean, anyhow? Who bring him 'way out here whar he cain't be no more use than two tails onto a bull-buffler? Surely you hain't bin durn fool enough to take him into your mess, as anythin' better'n cook?"

Patience ceased to be a virtue, and unheeding the imploring look which Luada cast upon him, Jesse Purchass tapped the irritable old bear on the shoulder, steadily encountering his fiery glare as the veteran wheeled upon him.

"Permit me to answer your questions, Mr. Kirkendall," he said, his tone even and manly,

his words falling sharp and clean-cut. "In spite of your sneers and insinuations, I am a man of as good blood as even you can boast, if not better. I met your daughter in society, loved her at first sight. I might have gone to you as an equal in name, in fortune, in all that is commonly held essential; but I preferred to win or lose on my simple merits as a man. For that reason I entered your service as a clerk. I performed my duty so well that not even you could find fault with my work."

"Who's denyin' of that?" bluntly interposed Kirkendall. "You did well enough as a counter-jumper. I didn't kick ontel you got 'bove your business, did I?"

Luada burst into a passionate cry:

"Father—Mr. Purchass—for my sake, hold!"

The young hide-hunter flashed a look of passionate love upon her pained countenance, but said, almost sternly:

"It is for your sake that I *must* go on and say all, Luada. Would you give even a father the right to say that the man who loves you best of all in this world, is less than a man?"

He turned once more to the irate yet sneering trader.

"If you mean by getting above my business, that I dared to avow my love for your daughter, I frankly admit that I am not worthy of such a prize; but I also say that I am to the full as worthy and deserving her love as any man who treads the footstool!"

"You mocked me then, even as you are sneering at me now. You bade me prove myself worthy to mate with your child, and told me how I might do it. You said that when I had made for myself a record equal to that of Spread Eagle Sam, I might return and plead my suit anew."

"I took you at your word. I learned to shoot. I came out here, and by good fortune made a friend of your model man. I may fail, but I am going to try my level best to stand on even terms with him when the season ends. Then, if I have reached your standard, Morris Kirkendall, I will come to you and once more ask you for the hand of your daughter."

"Which you'll be heap more like to ketch her pap's *boot*, instead! That'll be the answer you'll git from me fer your cussed impedance, critter!" spluttered the angry trader.

"If you refuse, I will turn to her," steadily resumed the handsome hide-hunter. "If she confirms your refusal, I will go off, never to cross the path of either again. But if she smiles—if she can return my love—I'll take her, with or without your consent, and in spite of your teeth!"

With this pointed sentence, Jesse Purchass bowed coldly, turned on his heel and strode rapidly away, paying not the slightest heed to the oaths and ravings which broke from the autocrat whom he had so flatly defied.

Spread Eagle Sam turned his back, and no longer able to restrain his feelings, leaped high into the air, cracking his heels together, flapping his arms like wings and emitting his peculiar, ear-splitting imitation of the eagle's shriek.

"Snow-white, an' never a paint-brush tetch'd him! Clean grit from the top story down to foundation, and the man that even winks to the contrary's a *hoss-thief* an' a grunter from Pork-barrel! Good—*Iaud!* ef my wings was long enough, I'd flop clean up to the sky an' paint his name in red letters a mile long, as a sign that my side-pardner Jes' is best little man that ever wore ha'r! An' I kin swaller without greasin' any critter that says he ain't—so *thar!*"

Tearing off his bullet-pierced hat, the huge hide-hunter flung it to the ground, stamping one foot fiercely upon it and standing with folded arms as he scowled ferociously from face to face—ending with Luada, winking belligerently.

It was a supremely ridiculous display, and even Morris Kirkendall lost a little of his hot acerbity as he looked and listened, then said, half reproachfully:

"You goin' back on the ole man, too, Sam?"

"Not on the 'riginal ole man, I ain't, boss," soberly replied Spread Eagle, coming down to the common level abruptly. "Not on the Morris Kirkendall I l'arned to love an' honor, while he was l'arnin' me to be a man like hisself. But on the crazy critter that's stole his boots, clo'es, hat, face an' figger. On the critter as cain't do common jestice to a decent young feller that's white clean through. On the critter that spits in the face of a good, true-hearted lad, an' tries to rub it in a foot deep, then threatens to bu'st his b'ilin' ef the boy shows his grit by kickin'. That's the critter I'm goin' back onto, boss!"

"For him—for that impudent squirt—for the fool puppy-dog that thinks he kin make a man take his two-cent squeak fer the notes of a bloodhound! Fer the critter that thinks the dress makes the man, an' looks to bamboozle me by riggin' out in the togs of a hide-hunter! Git out, Sam! You've gone clean out o' your common senses!" snorted the veteran.

"Boss, look you here an' lis'en while I whisper in your best ear," said Spread Eagle Sam, all traces of exaggeration vanishing, his voice earnest, his face lighted up with pure and loyal friendship. "You don't know the lad; I do. You never yet ketched me in a lie. You know I

kin spread the eagle a bit, when they ain't no need o' stickin' to business; but you know, too, that I don't brag fer the sake o' makin' folks think me a notch higher up than I really stan'.

"Go 'mongst them who's got the best right to know, an' ax 'em who's the boss hide-hunter now on the range, sense you've drawed out o' the business. Ten to one they'll say I be. That this is so, I stand ready to uphold, let who will buck ag'inst it. An' claimin' that I'm the Boss o' the Range, I tell you calmly an' in dead airnest, the next to me comes Jes' Purchass; the very critter you've bin tryin' to ride over rough-shod. I say it ag'in, he's the second best man on the range."

"Allow me to correct you, my dear sir," uttered a cool, musical voice, and Laughing Leo advanced, smiling carelessly, a veritable plains Adonis. "If Mr. Purchass stands one notch below you, his proper number is third, not second, since I have the honor of holding premier position."

"Premium physician be—blowed!" blurted the giant, with a contemptuous snort. "I said man an' hide-hunter."

"And I repeat, in plainer terms, for your especial benefit, Mr. Spread Eagle Sam," lightly laughed Laughlin, "that I am the best man and most skillful hide-hunter on the range this day! You may be second, or you may fall back to third position in favor of your friend and partner, Mr. Purchass, if you like his reputation better than your own."

Morris Kirkendall had been sharply stung by the desertion of his old-time pupil in favor of the young man whom he derided, and snapped at the chance of getting even thus offered. Stumping forward and grasping Laughing Leo's hand, he cried, eagerly:

"Ef you kin make your word good—ef you kin take 'em both down a peg, critter, ax me fer anythin' I kin give ye, an' it's yourn that very minnit!"

"There is only one reward I covet, Mr. Kirkendall."

"Win the right to ax it—beat 'em both blind, the boy in petick'lar—an' what you ax is yours!"

"Even if I ask for your most precious treasure?" uttered Laughing Leo, his blue eyes all aglow with eager earnestness. "Even if I ask for your daughter's hand in marriage?"

"Even that, ef you win the match, f'ar an' squar'!" cried the trader, blinded by his unreasoning temper.

Until now, Luada, though suffering as only a true, modest, sensitive maiden can suffer under like circumstances, had remained near, dreading to take such a decisive move as to flee without the permission of her irate parent. But this was the last feather, and her face flaming, her eyes flashing, her voice ringing out in just indignation, she confronted them with:

"Never! Not even a father can force me into such a shameless contest! Never shall the match be made with my consent!"

She covered her face with her hands, turned and hurried back to her tent, closing the flap behind her.

Morris Kirkendall scratched his head with a half-shamed air as he stared after her. He muttered:

"Durned ef I didn't ferget she was nigh. But no matter. You've got my word, younker, an' it's my bond. Beat Sam an' the squirt in a far trial at buffler, one single stand, an' come to me fer your winnin's. You'll git 'em, dead sure!"

Laughing Leo warmly shook the extended hand to close the strange compact, then turned to Spread Eagle Sam with a cool, business-like air that made the trader chuckle and rub his hands together in grim approval.

"You and I make claims to the same title, Mr. Ingalls, and as neither one is likely to take water in favor of the other until absolutely compelled to do so, let's see if we can't hit on a plan to settle the dispute, now and forever."

Spread Eagle Sam met his smiling gaze for a moment, then slowly shook his head. A dark flush came into his bronzed face, and the tremor which unsteadied his voice told how hard and bitter it was for him to utter the words, but his native gentility and true manhood lent him the strength needed.

"You hear what she said, critter? She don't like the idee o' bein' set up like a beeve fer the best shooter to take in pay. I don't see my way cl'ar to any 'rangement."

"I will stake five hundred dollars against your position as chief of this party, the result to depend upon the number of buffalo we can each kill in a single stand. If I lose, the money belongs to you, and you will never again be troubled with the sight² of my face. If I win, you are to either hunt up another place, or take a situation under me, as my best man. What do you say to this offer, Mr. Ingalls?"

"She said no," hesitated Sam, frowning.

"But you will say yes, my dear fellow," laughed his rival, softly. "If you persist in declining my offer—fair enough, as even you must admit—I will publish it far and wide that the brag hide-hunter of the range took water! That he was afraid to risk his laurels in open competition with a novice—a greenhorn who never shot a buffalo for money in all his life!"

"An' sign your name to it as a dirty liar!"

cried Spread Eagle Sam, with his face that of one pushed beyond endurance.

The laugh fled from the face of his rival, and hands moved toward the weapons at their belts; but Morris Kirkendall pushed between them, his own pistol out and cocked, his voice ringing out harshly as he grated:

"Ef they's any shootin' to be done, I'll do it, critters! Tetch a wepon, an' by all that's holy! I'll riddle ye!"

Laughing Leo was the first to recover himself, and with a light laugh he said:

"Your servant, Mr. Kirkendall. I promise not to shoot, even if Spread Eagle does show his claws."

"Sam, you heathen!" and Kirkendall turned upon him, coaxingly. "You've got to meet him as he says, fer the honor o' the craft! Beat him, an' I'll make the same promise to you—"

"To give me whatever I ax, to do with as I like?" eagerly muttered the giant hide-hunter.

"On my sacred word, Sam—Luada herself, if you like?"

"Done—with all-two-booth o' ye!" cried the hunter, his eyes glowing, a grim smile on his bronzed face. "Your tarms suit me plenty good enough, critter," to Laughing Leo. "Ef you beat me, I'll skin out an' spread the news that a new king hes come onto the range, an' Spread Eagle hes to hunt a new nest."

"Thanks," and Laughing Leo bowed. "As I am new to the business, will you arrange all matters, Mr. Kirkendall?"

CHAPTER XIV.

A MAN OF MAGNETISM.

"You couldn't pick out a better man, ef they was a hull rijiment afore ye, stranger," vigorously nodded Spread Eagle Sam, all traces of doubt or ill-humor vanishing from face and tones. "An' sence it's to be jes' a fa'r, squar' tug between you an' me, fer the best man to come out on top, I move we putt the hull a'fa'r into his hands, an' let him make all 'rangements for the two-booth on us. What say?"

"Nothing could suit me better, my dear fel-low," replied Laughing Leo, with a cordial nod.

"I'll take the 'sponsibility on one condition," said the veteran hide-hunter, speaking seriously. "They's too good stuff in both o' ye fer either one to git croaked by t'other. Jine han's an' say you'll ferget all this spit-spatting. Give your words as men an' honest hide-hunters that, let the trial go which way it will, you won't nuther o' ye lay up a hot grudge ag'inst the other. Do it, an' mean it, too, or durned ef I don't swaller every word I've spit out an' clar' the offer off!"

"Your wish is sufficient, without that terrible threat, Mr. Kirkendall," said Laughing Leo, smiling frankly as his gaze wandered from one to the other. "If it will help to bridge the bloody chasm, I am willing to ask the gentleman's pardon for my blunt words of a few minutes since. It was purely parliamentary language, and having gained my point—that of a fair meeting on an open field—I am willing to have it expunged from the record."

Spread Eagle Sam shook his head doubtfully, his honest face lighted up by a broad smile, his voice brisk and frank:

"You cain't prove it by me! I reckon it's all right, fur 's that goes, but whether you're talkin' Low Dutch or high Jarman, it's too 'way up fer my grade o' schoolin'."

"You kin rest easy when your int'rusters is in my han's, I reckon, Sam," and Morris Kirkendall, apparently in high good-humor with himself and all around him, slapped the giant patronizingly on the shoulder. "The younker means as how he on'y brustled up so f'erce to make you come down from the high hoss Beauty-bird pitched you onto. He wanted a match, an' he tuck the shortest road to git thar—see?"

"And whether he comes out first or last, he hopes to win and retain the good-will of Spread Eagle Sam," softly added Laughing Leo, with his most genial smile as he held out his hand.

The huge hide-hunter grasped it with honest fervor, his blue eyes glowing through their many-hued settings, his voice cordiality itself:

"Ef you don't deal in hoodoo, it gits me! Here you come 'cross my path, kickin' up the devil's own delight without ay, yes, or no. You run contrary o' my pard, doin' the best you know how to putt his nose out o' j'int. You rub mud all over me. You knock me west-end-an'-crooked with them wimmen-arms an' babby-han's o' yourn. You set me an' the boss chompin' our teeth at each other. An' then you smile an' laugh an' say ef we'll be good boys, you'll forgive us. An' the most cur'ous part o' the hull thing is that I'm jes' durned fool enough to cain't holp doin' what ye want!"

"In other words?" smiled Laughing Leo.

"Thar she am—the paw of a man that hes on'y one face fer his fri'nds, an' one face fer his enemies."

"And I am classed among the former, I trust!"

"Sart'in! Ef not, it's the back o' the han' an' that han' a fist that you'd git from me. I like ye—I cain't holp it! You've got a way that's more s'archin' then a dose o' quicksilver. You jump right into a critter's heart, whether he wants to see you thar or no. But mind ye, fri'nd; Jes' is my one pard, fer all, an' ef I kin

beat ye in this match, you needn't look fer me to hold my han' beca'se I say I like ye."

"Nor would I accept any such favor," was the prompt reply. "As I mean to do my level best, so I expect you to bring all your resources into play. This is no idle rivalry; it is for more than life or death!"

"Of all the windy critters!" sniffed the impatient trader, adding with a mock surprise: "What! you ain't come to a campin'-place, hev ye?"

"And waiting for you to catch up, Mr. Kirkendall," said Laughlin, with a soft laugh. "Spread Eagle and myself fully understand each other, now, and we are ready and eager to hear your final decision."

"You, too, Sam?"

"I'm in your han's all over, boss."

"All right. Now lis'en to the peppergram as I've laid it out fer your 'proval or disa'proval."

"Of course hides ain't quite in thar prime, as yit, the season hes hung off so 'markably; but this hunt is fer somethin' heap more 'portant then hides. Fer that reason, the trial shell come off jes' as soon as we kin find the bulls to work on."

"The bet shell be decided by the work done on one day fer the each o' you. They's to be on'y one stand fer each man, an' that stand begins the minnit he fires his fu'st shot. Ontel he fires that shot, he ain't oblieged to take that bunch, nur to shoot the trial from that kiver. He kin go whar he likes, an' take all the time he wants, jes' so he makes his score in the day sot fer him—twixt sun an' sun. But when his fu'st shot is fired, all's to go as she lays, onless the other critter comes foul play onto him. In a case like that, the jedge kin use his own jedgament; give the match to the man fouled, or set another time fer him to hev another trial."

"I'll send out the men right off to see whar the big herd is feedin', an' when thar signals o' diskivery is see'd, afore we kin say anythin' 'bout the lay o' the ground or sech-like, you'll draw lots to see which man shoots fu'st. The other will take his chainces the next day."

"Them's my idees, boys; what think of 'em?"

"They kiver the bull's-eye a foot deep!"

"If Spread Eagle is satisfied, I am."

"Then that settles it!" and Morris Kirkendall began stumping toward camp. "I'll git the men out scoutin'. I'm red-hot all over to see the fun!"

"Reckon you'll find my lads hes the best idee whar to do the lookin', boss. Ef you like to send them, they're at your service."

"Start 'em out, then, while I git the rest afoot."

"Come along an' see that I don't play ye no dirt, mate," Spread Eagle Sam said to Laughing Leo, who smilingly shook his head as he repled:

"I'm not afraid to trust you, Sam. When you get down to playing dirt, I'm ready to leave the world and climb a tree!"

He laughed, smiled, bowed, then moved leisurely away to the spot where his magnificent black horse was standing.

The herculean hide-hunter watched him for a brief space, slowly shaking his head, a puzzled light in his big blue eyes.

"It's hoodoo—it must be hoodoo! They ain't no other way to 'splain how he kin git all over me, like he does! Thar's little Jes', my pard. His hull soul an' body's sot on the ole man's gal. Ef he cain't git her, he'll do bloody murder to hisself or somebody else—that's dead sure! He 'pends on me fer clappin' a stopper over this critter, an' as his pard, I'm boun' to do my level best. But—durned ef I don't ketch my fool self wishin' that the laughin' critter may come out top o' the heap! It's hoodoo—it cain't be nothin' else!"

Nor was Spread Eagle Sam the only person who remarked that peculiar magnetism exercised by Laughing Leo over all with whom fate brought him in contact.

Though the afternoon was pretty well spent, such was the ardor of all concerned that it was decided best for the men who could be best spared from the camp to set out at once in quest of the "big herd," which the hide-hunters knew was somewhere in their neighborhood, though none of the party as yet had seen the drove.

As already mentioned, each hide-hunter proper, has two men assigned him, whose duty it is to skin his game and take care of the hides until they are fit to be "baled." The "skimmers" attached to Spread Eagle Sam's party, were divided into two bands, and each party was then busied in building a dug-out at widely separated points along the regular range of the bison, for successive use as head-quarters when the herd should work further to the south.

All this was by no means the regular rule with even the best appointed hide-hunters, but the season was so backward that they had ample time for use, and Spread Eagle Sam felt that there was little sense shown in roughing it when one might as well be comfortable.

An experienced hide-hunter can—or could, before his occupation became a thing of the past—almost unerringly mark out the route of the "big herd," and even point out their position with marvelous accuracy for any week in the season, for months in advance. Of course, in

case of unusually severe or protracted storms, his reckoning may prove at fault, but in nine cases out of ten, his predictions will be found true to the minutest point.

An old hide-hunter himself, and while in his prime the acknowledged "Boss of the Range," Morris Kirkendall spoke with confidence as to the discovery of the big herd, and would have fairly snorted at the idea of any one's doubting its being found within fifty miles of his camp, at the very outside.

He sent off his men, among them Dike Widgeon, the spy of the She Wolf, giving them directions for their actions when the herd was discovered.

Spread Eagle Sam also started off Johnny Bull and Kanuck on a similar mission, mounted on their spirited ponies. And as soon as they dashed swiftly away, the giant hide-hunter himself vanished from sight amid the broken rocks and defiles lying back of the camp.

He wished to see Jesse Purchass.

Laughing Leo mounted his good black steed, and rode leisurely away, no one save himself knew whither or what for.

Now that the bustle was over; now that there was nothing more to do until the smoke-signals from the men sent out to discover the whereabouts of the big herd should announce their success; now that he had leisure to reflect more calmly over his own actions and words, Morris Kirkendall began to feel as though he had suffered his peppery temper to carry him too far.

"Pore Beauty-bird! An' durn the snickerin' critter!" he muttered as he stumped slowly to and fro before the closed tent inside of which Luada had hidden herself. "Ef it ain't hoodoo work, like Sam said, what is it?" I kin see the look o' that cussed she wolf in his face, whenever he ain't talkin' an' bowin' an' smirkin' to a body! But then—I cain't holp but like him, try as I may. It's hoodoo, that's what it is."

The remainder of the afternoon crept by, and the shades of night descended over the earth without any sign coming from the men sent out in quest of the big herd. Morris Kirkendall did not really expect to hear from them before the middle of the next day, though he kept looking and watching in that direction for the smoke signals until it grew too dark to see anything half a mile away.

Supper was announced, but Luada declined to answer. She was not hungry; her head ached; she wished to be left in peace and quietness.

Laughing Leo returned just as the disconsolate trader was sitting down to his meal, and at once joined him, gay, smiling, bubbling over with good humor as usual with him; but the changeable old hide-hunter withdrew into his shell, showing more spines than ever marked a porcupine, passing from surly grunts to snarling snaps, and Laughing Leo wisely concluded to employ his time in sleeping.

Bright and early the camp was astir, Morris Kirkendall scanning the distant horizon for smoke-signals, but in vain.

"Time a-plenty, boss," chuckled Spread Eagle Sam, who had recently joined him. "We'll hear from some o' the boys afore that bay-window o' yourn hollers out dinner-time."

Luada made her appearance, bright and blooming, looking as though neither her headache nor her chagrin had lost her many hours of sleep. She smiled on her father, bowed a little coldly to Laughing Leo, and fairly overwhelmed Spread Eagle Sam by pretending to whisper in his ear, only to touch his flushing cheek with her warm, red lips.

The morning meal finished, Morris Kirkendall returned to his lookout station, Luada following him after administering a most decided rebuff to the smiling aspirant after her hand. Laughing Leo gazed after her trim figure for a moment, then, shrugging his shapely shoulders, he went to look after his horse.

For a few minutes father and daughter sat in silence, side by side, both plainly uneasy, wanting to speak of the matter which most deeply interested them just then, but neither knowing just how to open the conversation. Then, with a subdued snarl, Morris Kirkendall blurted out:

"Waal, why don't you out with it, gal? I know ye're jest achin' to give me a rakin' over fer what I said an' done yesterday. It's got to come out afore you're satisfied, an' I reckon I kin take the dose as well now as any time."

"You did behave like a great bear, and you know it," the maiden said, but softening her words with a dainty kiss. "It was shameful—to speak so before those men!"

"Come to look at it now, it was—part way," suddenly spluttered the eccentric, changeable old man. "I was red-hot, seein' that critter long o' you, when I hedn't no more idee he was in these parts then that he was in heaven! Then—an' I don't know but what that was the biggest p'int of all!"

"You mean him—Leo Laughlin?" whispered Luada, with a shy glance over her shoulder toward the camp, as though she feared the man named might be within hearing.

"That same durned critter!" and the wooden leg plowed a deep furrow in the soil. "Beauty-bird, hev you felt it too?"

"His magnetism? I feel it now! I feel it whenever he is within sight or hearing! And I felt it more powerfully than ever yesterday when I tried to insult him to his very face!" she murmured, shivering and drawing a little closer to his side. "Father, what does it mean? What is this mysterious power of his? Do you know—had he asked me then, with those eyes fastened upon my face—had he asked me if I loved him—I believe I could only have answered as he willed me to answer!"

"Mebbe you do love the critter, 'Beauty-bird?'" slowly uttered the veteran, watching her changing countenance, anxiously.

"I don't—I hate him!" she cried, impulsively. "I'm afraid of him—he haunts my dreams by night, he starts up before me by day whenever I get to musing. I know I hate him—and yet—I could not refuse his hand should he offer it to me now, try as I might!"

"I'll shoot the critter as sure—" Luada caught his arm and prevented him from rising.

"Father! would you commit murder?" Morris Kirkendall sunk back, grinning faintly.

"Waal, I never hev, an' I don't know as I could now, ef I wanted to ever so bad—on that critter! Ef he ain't a ginewine hoodoo, then I never see one—that's all!"

"Then you have felt his strange influence, too?"

"Hain't I?" echoed the trader, shaking his head with something strongly akin to superstition. "Don't I feel it clean down to my fingertips? Don't I rip an' t'ar an' cuss an' b'ile all over when he comes nigh, jes' tryin' to hold my own ag'in' the critter? Didn't I want to slap him over yest'day when he was blowin' in Spread Eagle's face? An' didn't I eend up by takin' his part an' crowdin' Sam into makin' the match with the snickerin' imp o' Satan? I jes' did honey!"

"It must not be—it shall never be—with me as the prize!" cried Luada, pale, her eyes flashing vividly.

It was an unlucky speech for her, since it awakened the obstinacy of the old trader. His jaws set themselves and his under lip protruded after that bull-dog fashion.

"It's too late fer kickin', now, Beauty-bird," he said, in a dogged tone of voice that she knew only too well. "I've passed my word, an' as I've never yet went back on that, I won't take up new tricks this late in the day. After all, he's w'u'th ten thousan' o' that Jesse Purchass!"

"Not in my eyes, father!" passionately cried Luada.

Morris Kirkendall scrambled to his feet with a shrill, far-reaching yell that startled all the camp as well as Spread Eagle Sam at his dug-out half a mile away. He flung up his hat and executed a clumsy dance as he yelled:

"Found! thar's the smoke as says so! Whooray!"

Sure enough, a slender column of blue smoke marked the distant horizon, telling plainly as though in articulate speech that the "big herd" was located by some of the party sent out in quest of it.

Laughing Leo and Spread Eagle Sam hastened up to the spot, and Luada beat a retreat, her face pale and resolute. Even were fortune to favor him in the coming contest, Laughing Leo might find it difficult to take possession of his prize!

"Gents, the herd is diskivered, an' ef it ain't too fur off fer us all to git thar in good time by noon to-morrow, the one o' you as fortin says hez the fu'st chaintce, will try his han' to-morrow a'fternoon. Ef not then, in the mornin' next a'fter. Is that satisfactory to ye both?"

"You are the one to decide all such points," quickly uttered Laughing Leo. "We have only to accept your decision."

"Right he is, boss. You set the time, an' we'll do our sheer the best we know how," promptly acquiesced Sam.

Kirkendall soon prepared lots, and in the drawing, Spread Eagle Sam won the right to shoot first. As this became evident, the giant hide-hunter leaped high into the air, emitting his wild shriek with unusual gusto.

"That's me! On top fu'st, last, all the time! Stranger, I'm sorry fer ye, but ye see I've got to beat ye!"

Laughing Leo proved true to his title as he grasped the hand which his rival offered him, and his voice was just as hearty and full of confidence as he replied:

"Thanks for your celebrating my good luck, Spread Eagle."

"Mine, ye mean!" spluttered Sam. "Didn't I win?"

"The privilege of showing me how to set to work, no more than that, my hearty. I am fortune's favorite still, since I'll have the benefit of your experience, added to my own luck and skill. Sorry for you, old fellow, but the prize is mine, sure!"

Spread Eagle Sam cast a wary, half-sheepish glance around them, then, with lips close to Laughing Leo's ear, he whispered:

"Ef it wasn't fur my side-pardner, Jes', durned ef I wouldn't almost like fer ye to win—but not quite!"

CHAPTER XV.

"TRICKS IN ALL TRADES BUT OURS."

No sooner were these essential preliminaries fairly settled, than Morris Kirkendall gave his remaining men orders to strike the tent and pack the wagons ready for moving.

"Wipe away that cloud from your face, Beauty-bird," he took occasion to say to Luada when he met her out of earshot of all others. "To the devil I throw his hoodooism or whatever you may call it! Spread Eagle will make a holy show of the braggin' snickerer when it comes down to work—*sure!*"

"But if he fails—if Laughlin wins?" murmured Luada.

The old trader tried to escape without answering, but when he found himself fairly cornered, his rugged face took on a look of curiously mingled obstinacy and cunning.

"Ef he does win, an' axes fer you, Beauty-bird, you got to go, dead sure; but you ain't no child o' mine ef you cain't manidge to break his neck afore we git back to St. Paul ag'in!"

He stumped away in hot haste, leaving Luada drawing figures on the gravel with the point of her shoe, a curious smile playing about her red lips, a peculiar light in her dark eyes.

Long before noon Morris Kirkendall on his lookout station caught sight of a horseman riding rapidly from the direction of the smoke-signal, and until he recognized the rider his enthusiasm was great. But then, with a muttered curse of disgust at the impudence of the fellow whose face so strongly reminded him of his divorced wife, Lena Burvenich, he stumped hastily away to the wagons, while Spread Eagle Sam chuckled and grinned and shook all over with high glee that finally found vent in one of his wild, unearthly shrieks.

"I *hed* to do it—*'deed I jes' did, boss!*" he spluttered apologetically, as the veteran scowled ferociously at his recreant pupil. "I *hed* to blow off steam or bu'st my b'iler right 'fore the comp'ny. To think that little boy Jes' hes come out at the top o' the heap this airy! To think that he wiped the eyes of all them old han's, an' at the fu'st time o' tryin', too! Git the baird ready, boss, fer yender's the lad that's airned it, fa'r an' squar'—my pard, little Jes'!"

"More like the pesky critter ketched sight o' the smoke an' tuck to his heels fer fear the Injuns made it!" growled the veteran, irritable as a bear with a sore head.

"Twon't do, boss—twon't do, nohow!" triumphed Spread Eagle, once more wholly loyal to his *protege*, despite the magnetic influence which Laughing Leo had gained over him, in common with father and daughter. "You're the head o' this job, an' sent out the boys fer the fu'st glimp' o' the big herd. You cain't go back onto the good ole rules an' regelations o' the craft, so git your baird ready an' ile up your tongue!"

The swift-riding messenger was now near enough to see the gestures which the giant hide-hunter made from the edge of the plateau, and rode direct for him, instead of the dug-out, half a mile below. And Spread Eagle, checking his breathless report, grinning like one filled to overflowing with pure joy, forced the young hide-hunter up to where Morris Kirkendall stood, a hairy object in his hand, a sour smile forced upon his rugged face. Luada stood beside him, and smiled sweetly and encouragingly enough to more than offset the evident disgust of her parent.

"Critter, do you come as a messenger from some o' the rest, or did you diskiver the big herd—ef it is the big herd—your own self—which I'm durned ef I b'lieve, even ef you was to take oath—so help you the Big Buffler?"

Jesse Purchass, though an actual "greenhorn" so far as the business life of a hide-hunter was concerned, of course had learned from the conversation of his mates many of the customs and legends which had once or still prevailed among the members of the craft. Among them was one which conferred sundry privileges on the lucky man who first sighted the "big herd" after all hands had received fair notice. And it was this that made Spread Eagle Sam lose no time in hunting up his "side pardner" at the rendezvous appointed, and sending him off to take part in the quest.

Though he had not thought of profiting by his good fortune until Spread Eagle Sam forced him before the trader, the young hide-hunter was stung into a cold dignity by the doubting interjections of the uneasy "boss," and steadily faced him as he made good his claims.

"I come on my own behalf, Worthy Chief, and claim the reward for first sighting the Big Herd," he replied, according to rule. "If I speak falsely, may each hair in the Magic Beard turn to rattlesnakes and scorpions, to feed upon my crooked tongue!"

Morris Kirkendall held in his hand the long, glossy black beard of a buffalo bull, once the pride of the herd. It was his duty to bestow this upon Jesse Purchass, dubbing him First Rifle of the party; to enumerate the different privileges his sagacity or fortune had gained him; to make a "spread eagle" speech and have a jolly good time in general. And doubtless had the lucky one been any other than this especial *bete noir* of his, Morris Kirkendall would

have rendered the occasion one to be remembered for all time, for a better-prepared orator after the hide-hunter fashion never drew the breath of life.

As it was, his blind, unreasoning dislike got the upper hand of him, and he blurted out:

"Hope it will, too! Take your durned ole baird!" and off he stumped in his rage, sawing the air vehemently with his huge fists, kicking up a shower of dirt with each plunge of his wooden leg.

Luada flushed vividly at this new explosion on the part of her parent, and with a half-defiant glance toward Laughing Leo who stood near, smiling at the absurd break-down, she grasped both of the handsome young hide-hunter's hands in hers and warmly uttered:

"May you long wear the honors you have so worthily won, and may you ever prove as fortunate and successful in whatever you attempt, Jesse Purchass!"

She dropped his hands, turned and fled before he could utter a word in reply. But his face lighted up with glad surprise and renewed hope.

Laughing Leo belied his title now, and for the first time in their experience of him, the hide-hunters saw a cloud upon his face, a look of anger or of trouble in his blue eyes.

Spread Eagle laughed long and loud, wringing the hands of his protege until they tingled and ached.

"Whooray fer the little lady! I glory in her spunk, an' I don't give a copper durn who hears me say so, nuther!"

"Don't make a 'farnal ejot out o' yourself, Sam Ingalls!" testily snarled Morris Kirkendall from a distance.

"After you is manners," laughed the honest hide-hunter, careless who he offended just then. "Fer fear the disease is ketchin', me 'nd my pard's gwine to ride over an' take a look at the big herd. You kin foller our trail, or—Yender comes some o' your men now. They kin show ye whar to go."

Without waiting for a reply, the Hercules hurried Jesse Purchass off toward the dug-out on the level below.

"Not that they's any sech monstrous hurry, lad," he said, with a knowing grin on his honest face. "The boss won't hear to our doin' any work afore he gits within good sightin' distance o' the ground. Fer all he's spent years on the range, an' he's made more bales by hunderds than the next best man in the biz, he's jes' like a boy now he kin smell the fun once more. A good-hearted critter, but the most keerless with that double-edged tongue o' his! He jes' is, fer sure!"

"He seems to hold a terrible grudge against me, for some reason," and Jesse Purchass sighed bitterly. "Yet I never harmed him. I always treated him with respect, and I served him faithfully while I was in his employ. I cannot understand it, particularly as he began picking on me long before he could even suspect I had falten in love with his daughter."

"You don't know him like I do, lad, or it wouldn't bother you a mite!" declared Spread Eagle, as they moved leisurely along toward the dug-out. "He tuck a dislike to ye from the fu'st. You begun to crawl into his good 'pinions, or he wouldn't 'a' felt more'n that. An' now you're showin' him that they's the clean stuff into ye; you showed him yest'day that you hed grit an' wasn't afeard to face him when his teeth was chompin' white foam; you showed him to-day that you hed plenty o' git-up-an'-git about ye, or you wouldn't 'a' tuck fu'st rifle from his men an' Kanuck an' Johnny Bull; you made him see that you knowed your rights an' was boun' to stan' up fer them, too; an' he couldn't go through the peppergram."

"Little consolation in that, I fancy!" with a short laugh.

"Don't you b'lieve it, lad, fer I know the ole man better. He's gittin' skeered o' hisself—you're crawlin' so deep into his good 'pinion that he cain't stop an' face ye down like he did at fu'st. He kin see the man into ye a'ready, lad, an' ef all goes well, I'm open to bet that the day ain't so powerful fur off when he'll see a son-in-law right in your two boots! Mind, I tell ye!"

Jesse Purchass made no reply, but his dark face grew brighter, and when he had eaten a hasty bite, he announced himself as ready to take the saddle once more, if Sam wished it.

"I reckon you'd better, lad," soberly replied the huge hide-hunter. "The ole man'll hev a better chainte fer findin' out how big a fool he's made out o' himself this bout, ef you ain't thar to keep his ebenezer up on eend."

As they rode away from the dug-out, passing below the plateau on which Morris Kirkendall had pitched his camp, the eager gaze of Jesse Purchass detected a flutter of white coming from the cover of a few bushes and evergreens, making his heart flutter far more vigorously than did that friendly signal. He returned the salute, and was rewarded by a brief view of a fair face.

"Talk of luck!" chuckled the herculean hide-hunter as they swept on at a steady gallop. "I'd ruther be born that way then rollin' over an' over in gold!"

Now that he was out of sight of his love, Jesse

Purchass once more became despondent and doubting.

"Much luck has befallen *me!*" he muttered, bitterly.

Spread Eagle Sam stared at him wonderingly.

"Ef you don't call it luck to hev the 'fections o' sech a dainty bit o' human natur' pinned onto you, then you're heap bigger ejot than I ever thought o' takin' fer a pard, Jes'!"

The young hide-hunter laughed harshly, his brows drawn.

"If I were only as certain that she really loves me as you appear to be, Sam, I'd laugh at the old man and that dandy popinjay, back yonder! But what did she tell me only yesterday? That she didn't know whether she loved or hated him the most, but that she knew were he to ask her to marry him she could not say no while his eyes were fixed on hers! Isn't that something to make merry over?"

"Wimmen is mighty qu'ar critters, Jes'," saiently observed the big hunter, scratching his chin reflectively. "Mebbe she said that to lynch you on a leetle faster? Mebbe she thought you wasn't settin' her high enough up, or was takin' a leetle too much fer granted-like in your sparkin'. Wimmen is up to all o' them kind o' dodges!"

"She was in sober earnest when she spoke of *him*," with a savage lash of his rawhide quirt through the air. "Sam, if that laughing devil gets the best of you in this match, and her father sticks to his agreement, she'll marry him, sure as fate!"

"Now, Jes', you look here," gravely uttered Sam, turning sideways in his saddle and steadily holding the glowing gaze of his companion.

"You've got the little lady on your side, an' ef you cain't down that laughin' critter fer good, so fur's she's consarned, you don't ought to hev her—so *thar!*"

"It's easy for you to talk, old fellow," with a faint smile. "But you're not in love."

"I was once," and the giant hide-hunter suddenly averted his face, his voice growing low and almost husky. "I knowed a gal that was the very moral o' Beauty-bird. I thought the world an' all o' her, but I was so skeered o' losin' her fer good an' all, that I couldn't make up my mind to ax her ef she'd take me. Then—waal, she was Beauty-bird's mother in the eend. It tuck me nigh ten year afore I could go to see them, an' it come monstrous hard, even then. She never knowed what I hed dreamp't over so often nights when layin' out on the Range, an'—Ugh!" shaking himself like a buffalo bull, and breaking into a short laugh. "That was long ago, an' we'll drap it now an' ferever! Thar's work ahead o' us, lad!"

For some distance the two hide-hunters rode on in silence, for Jesse Purchass was startled by the glimpse he had been afforded of what lay buried beneath the reckless, roaring outside of the huge hunter. But it was not in Spread Eagle Sam to let his tongue rust for want of use, and he broke out:

"Thar's tricks in all trades but ours, pard, an' I'm goin' to show you one or two o' em afore your head gits gray! Ef it was only my own repetition at stake—ef you didn't want me to beat that laughin' critter so monstrous bad, pard, I'd never think o' makin' use of 'em ag'in a greenhorn, good as he's showed himself sence he fu'st struck our camp. Fer you, my side pardner, an' the little lady, who give me a kiss this very mornin' to win fer her, I'll try all I know how!"

"And if you fail, by the heaven above us! I'll try a shot at something thicker than his silk hat!" fiercely ejaculated Jesse Purchass.

With a swift, dexterous movement, Spread Eagle Sam wheeled his horse directly in front of the speaker, his own eyes fairly flashing fire as he sternly cried:

"You've said them words afore, Jes', an' I passed 'em by as no more than empty wind from a sour stomach; but now look you here! You're my pard. I like you a heap. I'm goin' to win a mighty big prize fer you, ef I kin; but I'm goin' to do it *white!* I'll use sech tricks as the laws o' the game an' common honesty'll let me, but no more. An' ef you cut in with any didoes as'll make ag'in' him, by the Lord that made me! I'll turn ag'in' you ferever amen!"

Despite his high spirit, Jesse Purchass was cowed by the just indignation which seemed to fairly scorch him, and he made no reply. Spread Eagle Sam added, sternly:

"You've got to pass your word, as a man an' a true pard, that you'll play him no tricks while he's at work, or you cain't go no furder with me. Ef you wcn't promise, durn my hide ef I don't tie you hand an' heels an' keep you that-a-way ontel the match is settled! In one word—which is it, Jes'?"

"I'll give you my word," sullenly muttered the young man. "He's safe from me until after the match is decided."

"All right, Jes'," and Sam grasped his hand, all traces of indignation vanishing like magic. "Your word is good, an' I ax nothin' more. The laughin' critter ken look out fer his own head, I reckon, with fa'r warnin'; which I'll see he gits."

There was little more said until the end of their journey was reached, just as the sun was nearing the western range.

Leaving their horses hidden in a narrow defile, they climbed up the rocks until they were afforded a fair view of the "big herd" as it covered hundreds and thousands of acres of ground. Jesse Purchass could not gaze enough at the countless numbers, the sight being so new and strange to him, but Spread Eagle Sam was far more practical, and lost no time in taking a mental photograph of the situation, noting every fact and point which could possibly serve him in his part of the curious match so soon to be decided.

To the right of their position a large creek, or small river debouched from the hills, running a little distance and then widening into a considerable-sized lake or pond, before it continued its course toward the west. Almost directly below the two men, a shallow "draw" or coulee found birth as a continuation to one of the defiles, running out nearly half a mile on the prairie, then taking a gradual curve toward the pond, ending by running out to a level with the surrounding ground.

The nearest of the buffaloes were nearly two miles beyond that point, but as Spread Eagle Sam cast a keen, knowing look up at the sky, he broke out into a grim chuckle, then said:

"Le's go back to the hosses, Jes', an' cook a bite. I've see'd all I want to know, an' ef I don't putt up a he-ole score to-morrow fer the big prize, I don't want a red cent!"

The horses were unsaddled and staked out to crop the scanty grass, as they were too far from the plain to alarm the big herd by either sound or scent. And as they sat around the tiny camp-fire, eating, Sam gave his mate some idea of what he proposed doing.

An hour after dark, Sam handed Jesse a good-sized parcel containing salt, taking another himself, and they stole silently out from the hills toward the pond. As they did so, they saw that some of the herd were much nearer the water than when they first sighted them, and Sam chuckled again.

"I knowed it, Jes'! They're boun' to come fer water long afore we kin open the ball, sence we've got to wait fer the ole man to come up an' see fair play. The pastur's good, an' I reckon the critters wouldn't go fur off, anyway; but we'll make sart'in sure of enough to win the match."

"You think it will work, then?" a little dubiously asked the less experienced man.

"I don't think; I knows it, lad. Ain't I tried it on more times then you've got fingers an' toes? An' didn't it work to a t-y-t-y, all but once?"

"If it failed then, it may fail again—and now!"

"Waal, ef you ain't jes' about the onconsol'est critter to hev fer a backer in a big match, skin me fer a poor bull!" and Spread Eagle Sam fairly snorted in his disgust. "Not a chirp more 'll I lis'en to out o' your blamed trap this night—so *thar!*"

Abashed by this sharp reproof, Jesse Purchass imitated the movements of his huge companion, creeping stealthily along the curving coulee until near the pond. Then Sam lifted his head out of the grass and took a long, careful survey of the vicinity.

The night was moonless, but the stars were bright enough to show him that there were no buffaloes near the water, and touching Jesse as a hint to follow, he stole rapidly forward.

He ran along the edge of the pond where the grass first began to grow, scattering coarse salt quite thickly. From this belt, which was made only on the side nearest the coulee, he laid numerous narrow trails for several rods, then dug a narrow, deep hole in the ground, packing each one full of salt, well pounded down, ceasing only when each one of the trails led to a miniature salt mine, and his supply was exhausted.

Jesse Purchass had followed and imitated him in every particular, and his load, too, was disposed of. Then Sam beckoned him to follow, leading the way back to the coulee.

This he more carefully examined, creeping out on the open ground and scouting all around, glancing repeatedly back, as though to determine the effectiveness of the head of the coulee as an ambush.

At length he appeared satisfied with his examination, and Jesse Purchass saw him take a small package from his bosom and tearing open the buckskin cover, sprinkle it over the almost bare ground, now and then stooping over and using his knife, as though repeating the operation performed with the salt. Then, half an hour later, he returned to the coulee and nodded for Jesse to follow him.

"We've done 'bout all that's needed, I reckon," he muttered, as they neared the hills. Ef I don't roll up a big score to-morrow, then the devil's holpin' that laughin' critter, an' I know it!"

"You were scattering salt out yonder, too?" asked Jesse, curiously, as they regained their camp-fire and filled their pipes for a last smoke.

"Ef anybody axes you, pard, you tell 'em you don't know," grinned Spread Eagle Sam, nodding vigorously. "I tuck you out yender to watch an' foller an' imitate me in all I did, so you mought learn a new wrinkle or two 'bout the perfession. But I wouldn't let you do a lick o' work at it 'cause I didn't want you to hev to

lie to the old man ef he was to ax you did you holp me in anythin'. It won't do no harm to say you toted a bag o' salt, fer that don't count. But ef he was to ax you did I try anythin' else, you kin say with a free conscience that you don't know—fer you *don't!*"

"You think it will help you to-morrow?"

"Ef not, would I take so much trouble?" grinned Sam. "You watch the head of the coulee to-morrow, Jes', an' ef ye don't see me drop the boss o' the herd right on that bar' spot o' sile, you kin eat me fer a sucker!"

He would say no more on that point, but he spoke freely enough regarding the salt.

"You see the critters'll some on 'em come fer water. As they git thar fill, they'll set to pickin' in the nighest grass. They'll taste the salt, folter up the trails, lickin' all the way, an' when they find them holes packed full—waal, it won't be no little thing that kin drive 'em away from thar, Jes'!"

Removing their animals to a fresh feeding place, the two men put up their pipes, freshened the fire, rolled themselves up in their blankets, and with their saddles for pillows, they lay down with their feet toward the fire, and lapsed into a silence that speedily became sound slumber.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EAGLE SETS A COPY FOR THE LION.

BRIGHT and early the two hide-hunters were afoot in the morning, and a grim chuckle broke from the yellow-bearded lips of Spread Eagle Sam as he held up one hand to detect the direction of the wind.

"Score one fer our side, Jes', at the fu'st jump-off!" he cried, heartily. "The wind couldn't be better for the work I done las' night nur yit more 'commodatin'er fer the critters as 'll want to watch the style a ginewine, skientific workman sots about pilin' up the bales as comon truck scores single hides!"

But Jesse Purchass hardly heard or understood a word he said, his whole attention being given to the dull, confused sounds which came to their ears from the direction of the plain. There was the heavy trampling of thousands of hoofs, the bellowing of as many deep voices, with other sounds not readily recognized by a novice.

A savage curse hissed through his grating teeth.

"They're stampeding! That laughing devil has played us a foul trick! I know it!"

Spread Eagle Sam only laughed with double heartiness as he led the way over to the point from whence they had first viewed the big herd on the evening before!"

"Does that look like a full-blown stompede, Jes'?"

Not very much! The plain was fairly alive with the hump-backed beasts, from the furthest point the human eyes could command, clear up to the margin of the pond. And near the head of the little coulee, where Spread Eagle Sam had placed his mysterious bait, a number of the largest, fiercest bulls were pawing and stamping, routing and fighting like so many hairy demons gone mad!

"It'd be better fun then a circus, jes' to watch them fool' critters fightin' over nothin' but a smell," chuckled the huge hide-hunter, as he drew back and took Jesse Purchass with him. "They'll keep it up jes' as well without as with us, an' in the eend you'll find the boss o' the gang standin' thar with his ha'r on eend a ring o' them he's whipped out standin' all round, like coyotes watchin' a timber gray."

"If they were only here!" muttered Jesse, frowning. "If you could only begin work on them right off! Before they can get up here, the chance may be gone forever!"

"Don't you think it, Jes'. The boss ain't so turrible fur away as you mought reckon; he made them ole mules hump themselves ontel it got too dark to see straight, I'mbettin' big money. He'll hev 'em on the tight trot long afore we kin git our grub down an'a campin' place picked out, don't you skeer. He's jes' as hungry fur the fun as you be."

The handsome young hide-hunter made but a slim meal that morning, and noticing his growing uneasiness, Spread Eagle Sam took pity on him and said:

"Straddle your critter, Jes', an' go meet the boss. I'll hunt up a safe campin'-ground, an' meet you fur enough off so the big herd won't take the skeer."

He was as good as his word, and before the sun crossed the meridian, Morris Kirkendall and his party were snugly in camp.

"They's time enough atween now an' sunset, Sam," decided the veteran umpire, with a knowing squint at the sun. "You'll take your turn jes' as soon as you like—but ef you fire a shot afore we-all git good an' fixed to see the fun, I'll take you 'crost my knee an' make you think they's a bum'lebee's nest broke loose right thar—you hear me!"

"Time a-plenty, boss," laughed the Hercules, with a half-malicious glance toward Laughing Leo, who stood within easy hearing. "Tain't like I was buckin' ag'inst you, or some other 'sperienced hunter, ye know. No need o' my pilin' up more'n a couple or three hundreds, this bout, I don't reckon!"

"You want to do your level best, Sam," and Morris Kirkendall frowned darkly. "Ef I ketch either one o' you boys like ye was throwin' off, durned ef I don't wipe up the hull perayrie with your karkidges—so thar!"

All parties were too deeply interested in the result to think of waiting for a regular dinner, and Luada had packed up some cold victuals in a basket, which she gave to Jesse Purchass to carry. Spread Eagle Sam had told the young hide-hunter to act as guide to the party, taking them to the point where the big herd had been first sighted. He, himself, remained behind to make a few final preparations.

Jesse Purchass quickly performed the duty assigned him, and without exposing themselves too fully, the party were soon eagerly watching the interesting scene below.

The plain was fairly alive with the shaggy animals, and where Sam had planted his salt, the buffaloes were crowded as close together as their sizes would permit.

On the opposite side of the coulee, a mammoth bull was slowly pacing back and forth, pausing now and then to paw the earth, or with outstretched head utter a low, threatening bellow as though in grim defiance to the other bulls ranged around him, though at a respectful distance.

The ground was torn and trampled. The monarch of the herd bore gaping wounds in his sides and shoulders, freshly inflicted, while many of those around him were as badly or even worse marked. It was clear that there had been a tremendous fight going on, ending in the success of the hairy king.

Morris Kirkendall took all this in at a single glance, and there was a malicious twinkle in his little gray eyes as he turned toward Laughing Leo, who stood with carelessly folded arms just behind Luada.

"It's goin' to be a monstrous hard job Sam'll cut out fer you, critter! I never see things laid out more convenient in all my 'sperience, an' Sam is jes' the lad who kin turn 'em all to mighty good 'count, now *I tell ye!*"

There was a light, mellow laugh, singularly free from anxiety, considering how much was at stake, and Laughing Leo said:

"With the single exception of yourself, my dear sir, there lives no man by whom I would rather be defeated than by Spread Eagle Sam. But the odds are too heavily against the gallant fellow. As the champion of beauty," with a graceful bow to Luada, "my defeat is absolutely impossible!"

An angry flush leaped into the face of the maiden, and as her dark eyes sparkled with mingled dislike and annoyance, she spiritedly exclaimed:

"Self-elected, then, Leo Laughlin, for most certainly I did not select you as my champion. I pin my faith on honest, true heart of gold, Sam Ingalls! As for you—may your defeat be as great as your assurance!"

With a mock courtesy Luada slipped around to the other side of her father, who chuckled heartily at the sharp reproof administered to the man whom he hardly knew whether he liked or hated the most heartily. And in this delight, he failed to notice the fact that Luada was now close beside Jesse Purchass—or that neither of the youngsters seemed annoyed beyond endurance by that singular chance!

Spread Eagle Sam came up just at that emergency, and thus Laughing Leo was spared the trouble of making any reply to that cutting speech.

"Waal, boss, how is it?" carelessly inquired the huge hide-hunter. "You satisfied with the way things look? Ef you be, I reckon it's pretty nigh time I was gittin' down to work."

"So fur's I kin see, it's all squar'," was the deliberate response. "Unless t'other critter hes some objections, you kin wade in as soon's you're a mind to, Sam."

"No objections, and only one word to say," uttered Laughing Leo in answer to the inquiring glances cast toward him. "Do your level best, Spread Eagle. I don't want to win through a fluke or anything like a walk-over."

Sam grinned, cordially putting out his hand.

"It's a pizen pity they cain't both o' us come out on top o' the heap, lad, but it's age afore beauty, this bout!"

He was the very beau ideal of a hide-hunter, as he turned away to gain the shallow coulee, by means of which he expected to steal within easy range of the buffalo.

As before mentioned, his garb was of a dead-grass color, fitting his magnificent frame closely, yet permitting perfect freedom of limbs and body. Over his skull was drawn a tight cap which came down to his eyebrows. Around this was fastened a mass of sunburnt hair, taken from the summer head of an old buffalo bull, and so arranged as to closely resemble an uncropped bit of bunch-grass.

He bore his favorite rifle, called after its inventor, Christian Sharpe, of New Jersey. It was one of the latest models, and at that date the prime favorite with nearly every professional hunter, though since in a great measure gone out of fashion and favor.

About his waist he carried a double belt of leather, filled with cartridges, handy for use.

In addition he carried his usual armory of knife and revolvers, though this was probably more through habit than from any idea of using them that day.

Morris Kirkendall, Luada and Laughing Leo were supplied with glasses through which they could note the slightest action of the hunter as he entered the coulee and crawled silently toward his chosen "stand." And it is probable that never before in the history of hide-hunting did a man enter the lists with as many or fervent prayers silently sent up for his complete success in his venture.

Breathlessly they watched his advance, casting occasional hasty glances at the nearest buffaloes to see if any of them betrayed uneasiness or signs of suspecting the presence of their feared enemy; but the closely-packed ranks near the pond continued to lick the cunningly-baited ground, and the monarch of the herd across the head of the coulee still paced his self-appointed beat, uttering his savage defiance, watching and watched by his defeated rivals.

And then—a puff of light-blue smoke shot out from the withered grass, and the huge bull dropped slowly to his knees as though, weary with his parade, he was seeking renewed vigor through sleep!

A subdued report came to the thrilling ears of the watchers among the rocks, and with fiercely-beating hearts they looked to see if the other buffaloes had taken the alarm. But there were no signs of affright. The shot was not noticed in that confusion of sounds; of clattering hoofs and clashing horns, of bellowing, pawing, routing brutes, in play or fierce earnest; neither the little puff of smoke nor the report caused the slightest alarm.

And a low cry of grim exultation came to the lips of Morris Kirkendall as he turned and glared into the smiling, handsome countenance of Laughing Leo.

"Good boy, Sam! Thar goes the fu'st shot, an' the head o' the big herd is laid out cold as a stone. The Eagle's gwine to fly mighty high this trip, critter!"

"The higher the better," was the laughing response. "Ay! though he flies high enough to perch on the apex of the sun, the lion shall pull him down and pluck out his choicest plumes to crown the queen of beauty with!"

"Of all sounds, the most disgusting to my mind is the idiotic howl of the wind blowing in and out of an empty whisky-flask!" cruelly observed Luada, in a tone quite loud enough to meet the hearing of the one who had paid her such a neat compliment but an instant before.

Jesse Purchass laughed softly; Morris Kirkendall fairly snorted; Laughing Leo smiled as placidly as though he utterly failed to read the riddle. And then another faint report from the distant coulee drew the eyes and thoughts of every one back to Spread Eagle Sam and his fortunes.

Having disposed of the proven head of the herd, the one who, by virtue of his important position, is ever on guard against danger, and whose slightest note or symptom of suspicion is enough to set the vast body in motion, while an additional bellow from the same source would set them off in a wild stampede that naught could stop until wearied nature gave out, Spread Eagle Sam knew that the most difficult and delicate portion of his work was done.

Still, he was too experienced to throw away the slightest chance, even had there not been so much at stake upon his performance that day. He selected his second victim, one of the bulls on the outer edge of the circle, and sending the heavy plug of lead direct into the little spot of short hair behind the foreleg, where the point of the shoulder-blade had worn it almost bare, he chuckled beneath his breath as his second buffalo sunk to its knees, with a faint, tired bellow.

It is a curious fact, but none the less true, that the surviving members of a gang of buffalo will stand stupidly watching the death-struggles of their fellows, showing no signs of alarm at the rifle reports, paying no heed to the warm scent of flowing blood, while even a severely wounded animal will do no more than plunge and prance around a little without any attempt at flight, so long as they fail to catch the wind of the hunter, or do not distinctly see his person. And now, though the blue smoke rose distinctly above the head of the coulee at each shot fired by Spread Eagle Sam, the dull-witted creatures did no more than cast an occasional wondering glance in that direction, while, in more than one instance, an unhurt brute would advance to a dying fellow, smelling of the life-blood as it streamed from the death-wound, thrusting out its clumsy neck and almost reversing its flexible nostrils as it uttered a lazy bellow!

As bullet after bullet sought and found a victim, Laughing Leo smiled less and less blandly as his interest increased, and he watched the steadily growing list of dead buffaloes which Spread Eagle Sam was placing to his credit, with something like that dark, troubled light in his blue eyes.

And Luada, noticing this, smiled and pinched the arm of Jesse Purchass in silent ecstasy!

And Morris Kirkendall! He writhed and squirmed so constantly that he could hardly keep his glass to bear on the slaughter. He

Spread Eagle Sam.

chuckled and grunted and muttered and champed his strong teeth in almost insane delight. It was a revival of his past life, doubly delicious after so many years of abstinence. He felt as though his life depended on the success of each shot, and when one of the last bulls, by moving a little, just as the herculean hide-hunter was pulling the trigger, escaped immediate death, he groaned aloud and beat his hot forehead against the cold rock on which he was lying.

"Durn an' double durn the cussed contrary luck to gemently! Did you ever see sech a *durn* fool of a buffler? Cain't stan' an' take—*Good boy, Sam!* Whooray fer our side!"

He fairly hugged himself in his wild glee as another puff of smoke came from the dry grass and the wounded bull dropped in its tracks as though suddenly stricken by lightning.

"How's that, critter—how's that?" he chuckled, turning his head to glare exultantly upon Laughing Leo.

"Well, not so bad as it might be, though a single hide is hardly worth a double shot," coolly retorted the handsome rival to Spread Eagle Sam. "It spoils *his* clean score, and leaves *me* an opening. Still, nineteen out of a possible twenty is very fair."

"Waal, I will be darned!" spluttered the astonished trader, while Luada whispered into the willing ear of her nearest companion:

"Now I know I hate him—the ugly villain!"

Four more shots Spread Eagle Sam fired, and then the last one of the bulls lay motionless upon the blood-soaked ground.

Twenty-three head and only twenty-four shots fired! As Laughing Leo admitted, this was doing very fairly!

Through their glasses, the party on the rocks saw Spread Eagle Sam wave a hand toward them, and then cautiously alter his position, facing the densely packed mass of cows and young bulls around the salted margin of the pond.

Here he fired more rapidly than before, knowing well that there was even less danger of stampeding them, but he remembered how much there was at stake, and sent each bullet as true to the mark as though he had but one shot, and on it his very life depended.

Rapidly his score mounted up, and Morris Kirkendall could hardly keep from leaping to his feet and yelling aloud in his intense excitement—but then a fierce oath burst from his lips, and he hurled his glass to the ground, shivering it to pieces as he pointed with trembling finger to a small buffalo cow that had just come out from the rocks a little to their right, and almost directly in line with Spread Eagle Sam!

"Ef she ketches his wind—By the double-horned devil! she's done it now!" he howled savagely, as the cow suddenly flung up her tail and gave vent to a wild bellow of alarm, then dashing straight for the densely-packed herd.

Spread Eagle Sam had just fired a shot, and though he whirled around at the first bellow, it took a few precious seconds for him to extract the empty shell and reload, and though the intermeddling cow dropped as though under a thunderbolt, the mischief was done.

What the frequent reports, the falling of their mates, the scent of blood, the dying bellows and moans, had failed to produce, that single bellow of alarm effected. Roaring, routing, climbing upon and over each other in their desperate efforts at flight, the frightened beasts created an uproar that almost deafened the watchers, making the very earth tremble. And knowing that nothing could check them now, Spread Eagle worked his rifle with all possible speed, pouring a stream of lead into the swarming mass as it rolled further and further away, only ceasing when his last bullet fell short. And then, one by one, he knocked over the three cripples that lagged behind the rest; as the last one dropped dead, leaping from his cover and uttering his celebrated shriek as he flung his hairy cap high in the air!

He stood still, seemingly engaged in counting his victims, then tucked his hot rifle under his arm and striding back to the hills where his friends awaited his coming, Luada brightly smiling, her eyes glowing, her cheeks flushed; Jesse Purchass silent, but with a triumphant glitter in his dark eyes; Morris Kirkendall still grumbling at the stupid cow who had spoiled such a remarkable score.

"On'y for her, the high-up critter wouldn't never 'a' stopped bowlin' the hides over! Wouldn't 'a' left a durned one o' all the big herd to go to seed! Durn sech a fool' cow anyhow, I say!"

And as Spread Eagle Sam came up, smiling all over his honest face, his first words were to Laughing Leo:

"Thar's a leetle copy fer ye to foller, mate! Tain't as good as I counted on makin', but mebbe it'll serve the purpose."

CHAPTER XVII.

LAUGHING LEO TAKES THE FIELD.

"EXCUSE me, dear fellow, but please change your word copy to mark or example, and omit the termination altogether, 'the plains Adonis' retorted, with a ready and admirably affected

yawn behind his shapely hand. "I never follow; I am original or nothing."

"Reckon so—but ef I know what you're tryin' to git through ye, hope to break my neck the next time I go to set down onto my left fly flipper!"

"You have done well—almost as well as I anticipated, and I beg leave to congratulate you," coolly added Laughing Leo, grasping the hand of the giant hide-hunter and shaking it with hearty grace. "Believe me, dear fellow, I am perfectly honest in my congratulations, too, though a stranger might suspect me of speaking one word for you and two for myself, to speak in the vulgate. What a pity you lost your nerve when that inquisitive cow came up behind you! Only for that your score would have been almost perfect!"

Spread Eagle Sam withdrew his hand and fell back a pace or two, scratching his chin dubiously as his big blue eyes stared at the smiling speaker. He did not know what to make of Laughing Leo, and for once his tongue was paralyzed.

Not so with Morris Kirkendall. The trader listened with open mouth to that drawing speech, and the ridicule, the final slur which it tried to cast upon his pet model, set his peppery temper on fire. Almost fiercely he assailed Laughing Leo with:

"Ef stale wind wasn't cheap, critter, you'd be the richest man in seventeen States! Sech talk! Lost his narves, eh? Done pritty well, did he? Waal, I should remark! Sixty-odd head at a single stan' does soun' pritty well, now don't it? Why, durn your double-gearied tongue, it's the best score on record!"

Morris Kirkendall lifted his wooden leg and brought it down heavily to emphasize his statement, thereby almost coming to grief. The wooden peg entered a crack in the rock, and his balance destroyed, the irate trader plunged headlong into the arms of Laughing Leo, who withstood the shock like a rock wall.

He gently restored Kirkendall to his perpendicular, without cracking a smile, then quietly made reply:

"You will not have that to say when the sun goes down on the morrow, my dear sir, if all goes well."

"You hain't any idee you kin beat it, hev ye?" almost snorted Spread Eagle Sam, his flushing face and glittering eyes showing how rapidly his temper was rising before that cool and careless demeanor.

"My money says so," laughed the prairie dandy. "And why should I not? A buffalo is a big mark to shoot at. They are by no means difficult to kill, when one knows where to plant his lead. You scored sixty-one out of a possible sixty-nine. You fired several shots when only chance could send them home, and that is why I said you spoiled a fair score by losing your nerve under the pressure of excitement.

"If the plain truth offends you, so be it. Good-day!"

With a bow, he turned on his heel and strode away from the party, leaving them half-provoked, half-relieved.

Morris Kirkendall took possession of the hide-hunter as they slowly made their way over the difficult route to the camp, but not until Luada, blushing like a red rose, half-crying, half-laughing, pulled his head down to her level as she stood on tiptoe, then kissed him thrice in succession, squarely on his bearded lips, whispering oh! so softly:

"For him—for me—for you—you glorious, great big Eagle! And I'll give you a thousand more when he is defeated!"

"Give 'em back, Sam, you scoundrel!" chuckled Morris Kirkendall, his gray eyes twinkling, his broad, massive face fairly aglow with delight and good-humor. "Don't let her bamboozle ye this airily in the day, or I know who'll wär the trowsis after to-morrow—'deed I do, now!"

"Then you stick to your barg'in, boss?" eagerly asked the hunter. "You hain't forgot you said I ought ax ye fer any pay I wanted best ef I got the 'big rifle' over that critter?"

"I said it, an' I meant it, boy," was the prompt response.

Spread Eagle Sam flung aloft his hairy cap and uttered a shriek that far overtopped his best record in that line.

"Then, no matter how the match eends, we'll hev a weddin' an' a dance an' a drunk an' a Good Lawd! hold me somebody, 'fore I spreads my wings an' floats off to heaven o' love an' blissful light—amen!"

Morris Kirkendall looked at the wildly enthusiastic hide-hunter for a moment in doubt, his brows beginning to lower, his smile turning to vinegar and pepper-sauce as a dread suspicion assailed his mind.

"Sam, you don't mean to—"

"Take the best an' the preciousetest thing I kin lay my ole han's onto? Bet your sweet life I jes' do, honey!"

By this time they were near the camp, and from a neighboring clump of timber a black horse stepped, bearing a rider on his back, handsome and graceful, smiling as only Laughing Leo could smile; but it was Laughing Leo in still another character.

The gay and flashy garb of the plains Adonis

was gone, and in its stead they saw a closely fitting suit of dead-grass color; but of the softest velvet, instead of harsh ducking. On his head was a helmet of the same material, trimmed with a long ostrich plume, dark gray. In addition to the pistol-belt around his waist, he carried a Sharpe's rifle in slings at his saddlebow.

With a respectful bow and lifting of his hat, he said:

"Mr. Kirkendall, I am about to follow the herd, and select a place where you can witness my work to-morrow. It will save time if you will kindly permit one of your men to bear me company, to return and act as your guide. May I ask this favor?"

"It's your right, not a favor, critter. Take who you want. Ef he don't come back afore day, he'll find us on the move, 'long the aidge o' the open ground. 'Course, ef the stompede lasts too long, so's we cain't ketch up in plenty time, your stan' will hev to go over ontel the next day."

Ten minutes later, Laughing Leo was riding swiftly away from the camp, accompanied by Dike Widgeon.

Was it only a coincidence, his selecting the spy of the She Wolf for a companion on this occasion?

But Morris Kirkendall could not rest easy in camp. He had hardly gained it before he was casting longing, impatient glances in the direction of the plain, and at length he called Spread Eagle Sam to take a little walk with him.

The giant obeyed, only casting a reassuring glance toward Luada, whose face grew paler and her merry eyes troubled, for she, too, had rightly divined the suspicions which the old trader had taken into his never-resting brain.

In idle conversation, which requires no record here, the two men made their way to the mouth of the pass, as being far easier than to climb over the rocky trail ending at the cliff from whence they had witnessed the feeding herd before the first shot in that strange match was fired.

Already the rearmost ranks of the immense mass had disappeared from sight, but the cloud of dust marked their course plainly enough for such old hands.

"They won't stompede so fur's I was skeered of, or they'd tuck straight in the eyes o' the wind," muttered Morris Kirkendall, nodding his head until the joints of his neck fairly creaked. "They'll come to a stop as the sun gits low down, an' I'm open to bet odds they'll be nigh enough the range for the critter to drap 'em from ahind the rocks, ef he wants."

"Like enough," assented Spread Eagle Sam. "Ef Dike don't post him on the dried liver p'int, or ef they hain't got any, I ain't goin' to git bad skeered 'bout losin' the match; in a hurry, anyway."

"Which 'minds me," slowly uttered Kirkendall, covertly but keenly watching the effect of his words. "'Course you was only jokin' in what you said 'bout thar bein' a weddin', no matter whether you won or lost the match?"

Spread Eagle Sam laughed, lightly.

"Not ef my mem'ry hain't made a fool out o' me, I wasn't. Didn't you sw'ar that ef that snickerin' critter won, he mought hev whatever he axed you fer?"

"Yes; but I was red-hot, then, an' didn't stop to think."

"You said it, an' the young feller clinched it right off. That's ef he won an' I lost. Then you told me the same thing, only more so; you swore I could hev Luada ef I axed fer her, without any hintin' on my side. Now didn't ye?"

"But you're twice as old—an' then you ain't no marryin' man—you know that, Sam!"

"How much older then you when you tuck her mother? No, boss; they's only one way fer you to git out o' it, an' that is to take water afore the hull crowd. Ef you kin go back onto your own free word in sech a style, I won't grumble a mite!"

With a sullen snarl, the baffled trader turned and stumped away, leisurely followed by the grinning hide-hunter, who gave Luada a reassuring wink as he reached the camp.

Until then, Jesse Purchass felt that paradise was very near him. Luada smiled upon him. He was permitted to bear her company, to touch her hand now and then, to whisper soft words into her willing ears, while Morris Kirkendall had apparently forgotten that any such person existed.

But now—the suspicious old fellow called Luada away, and openly snapped and snarled at the presumptuous critter who dared to remind him of the she wolf. Without giving the young hide-hunter any actual handle for replying, he managed to make him utterly miserable, to mock and shame him before the face of the maiden for whose love he was famishing; and in a spasm of sullen fury, Jesse Purchass fled from the camp into the night.

It was past midnight when Dike Widgeon returned to the camp, bringing news that drove slumber from the eyes of at least Morris Kirkendall for the remainder of that night.

The big herd had not stampeded far, for it is

not a trifling task to get such an immense mass under full headway, unless the alarm be unusually severe or protracted. Thanks to the haste with which Spread Eagle Sam shot down the cow whose bellow of alarm had caused the stampede, the tidings she undoubtedly tried to convey to her mates by that fierce outburst, reached only those nearest her, and the panic was not intense enough to spread through the entire herd. As the part actually alarmed pressed on, the rest took up the motion, but it was purely mechanical, and lasted only until the waning sun brought thoughts of rest and food.

The herd was still in a comparatively solid mass, the nearest portion of it being rather less than a dozen miles distant from the camp.

Long before daylight, Morris Kirkendall had the cook out and busily engaged in preparing breakfast, which was eaten by the red light of the camp-fires. And the wagons were left under guard, while the party took saddle and rode out on the hoof-scored plain before it was fairly light enough to distinguish the level ground from the outlying rocks.

Despite his wooden leg, Morris Kirkendall was a good rider, and his thirst for the fray was quite sufficient to keep him at the head of the little cavalcade until the point indicated by Laughing Leo was shown them by Dike Widgdon.

"He said mebbe he couldn't be hyar to show you the ropes, boss, but that he was willin' to let you pick your own place. He knowed you'd do nothin' to hinder his chancies."

The veteran grunted by way of comment, but it was plain to be seen that this confidence did not seriously displease him. He carefully surveyed the lay of the ground, but as it was unfamiliar to him, he turned to Spread Eagle Sam for guidance.

Leaving their horses at a safe distance, the huge hide-hunter led the party by a winding and sometimes difficult route through the broken ground, at times having to carry the blushing, laughing Luada in his mighty arms. After half an hour of this work, the one-legged veteran sweating and panting but never giving grunt or growl of disapproval, Spread Eagle brought the party out on the high ground, from whence they had a clear and unobstructed view of the plain, almost precisely similar to that on the past day. The herd looked almost exactly the same as then, though a little further away from their point of lookout.

Just as then, a huge bull stood in a respectfully wide circle of its wounded fellows, roaring out its sullen defiance. And both Kirkendall and Spread Eagle Sam looked sober as their glances met.

"That's your doin's, you pesky critter!" growled Kirkendall, turning upon the grinning Widgdon. "You putt him up to that dodge, deuce grill ye fer a hedge-hog!"

"I'd take a heap longer head nur mine to post him, boss, an' you don't want to let that slip your mem'ry," chuckled the old hide-hunter. "What he don't know about the tricks o' the trade ain't sca'cely wu'th knowin', now I tell ye!"

"Healthy ole greenhorn he is, ef he did say so!" snorted Kirkendall, in huge disgust. "Whar's he gone to? Why ain't he here to take the word an' go ahead?"

"Maybe he's shown us another trick, by running away from certain defeat!" sneered Jesse Purchass.

Spread Eagle Sam turned upon his mate before the old man could find words with which to rebuke his audacity.

"That ain't white talk, an' you know it, Jes'. I ain't dead in love with the critter my own self, but I know he ain't that kind o' cat. He's clean grit from top story to basement, an' he won't squeal out whipped while they's a ghost of a chance left to him. You know it, too, Jes'."

"Whar is he then?" snarled Morris Kirkendall.

"He tole me ef it should happen so he couldn't be here to meet ye, boss, fer you to set off a smoke puff o' powder when you was ready fer him to begin."

The trader hesitated, half-inclined to resent this cavalier treatment. He swept the surface of the plain with his glass, a substitute for the one which he had ruined in his passionate fit the day before.

There was not much to see, save the closely-packed herd, some feeding, some lying down, others engaged in rough and clumsy play. The new monarch of the herd still kept up his sullen defiance without an acceptor.

There was a shallow coulee, almost precisely similar to the one which had stood Spread Eagle Sam in such good stead while he was making his offer for the precious prize at stake, but the wind had veered around to the southeast, and there was danger of the herd catching the scent of the hunter too soon should he try that cover.

"Yit thar he must be!" muttered Kirkendall, as he gave Dike Widgdon the signal to set off his powder-puff. "Tkey ain't no other kiver nigh enough the bigness o' the herd. He's beat afore he pulls his fu'st trigger!"

"Mebbe he's tuck to some other kiver, furder up the—Hellow! look at that, will you!" excitedly ejaculated Spread Eagle Sam, as the bull

in the circle of his fellows pitched forward upon his nose, fairly rolling over end for end!

There was not the faintest sound of a rifle-shot reached their ears, nor could they distinguish anything like smoke rising from the coulee. Yet—beyond a doubt the huge bull was dead—slain in its tracks by Laughing Leo!

"Ef the 'tarnal critter ain't comin' of his hoodoo business onto the bulls, I'm a howlin' liar right from Storyville!" muttered the excited and almost demoralized trader.

Spread Eagle scratched his bearded chin in speechless wonder, his keen blue eyes roving along the course of the coulee, but without making any discovery to lessen his growing superstition. No report, no smoke, and yet—even as he gazed another of the bulls fell as though smitten by lightning.

"Ef he ain't the devil, then I cain't guess!" he muttered, the uneasy light deepening in his eyes.

And in rapid succession one after another of the bulls fell suddenly or staggering for an instant, sunk upon their knees, and laid down as though abruptly overpowered by fatigue.

And still the mystery was not solved, further than that Spread Eagle and Morris Kirkendall became convinced that Laughing Leo could not have taken cover anywhere in the coulee. They had searched every foot of it with the glasses, and knew that the thin grass could not possibly give him shelter sufficient to baffle their scrutiny.

Luada was pale as a ghost as she, too, breathlessly watched the strange affair. As bull after bull went down in death before the hidden and silent marksman, her fears increased and she trembled like a leaf in the cover of her lover's arm.

No one thought of them. All eyes were fixed on the mysterious drama being enacted before them, and vainly searching for Laughing Leo.

"Jesse," she whispered, her face white, her eyes filled with desperation strange to behold in one so young and lovely. "If that laughing demon wins, it will be my death! If you love me—if you ever hope to win me for your wife—go and foil him! At all risks—I bid you go!"

He bent his head toward hers, a swift glance showing him that no eyes were upon them. His lips pressed hers, then he turned and stole silently away.

Luada crept up closer to her father, and hardly had she settled beside him, than he uttered a stifled cry of mingled wonder and excitement.

"Thar he is, by the 'tarnal! Don't ye see the bit o' blue smoke risin' frum the open—thar nigh the kumpass weed?"

"Smoke it does look like, but whar's the critter? They ain't kiver enough thar to—now I will be durned!" and Spread Eagle Sam snatched off his cap and flung it to the ground, laughing harshly as he added:

"In a hole an' kivered over with grass, the pesky critter! An' he said he was a greeny at the business! Ef he didn't ought to win, I'm a liar!"

"That's it—I kin see the grass move—look thar!" muttered Kirkendall, as a barely perceptible whiff of smoke, dim and haze-like, rose from the spot indicated. "I know it all now! The tricky critter! Ef he ain't a holy terror!"

"But I hear no report, father!" murmured Luada, saying the first thing that came into her mind as the trader turned to cast a look of triumph on Jesse Purchass.

"It's the new powder, Beauty-bird, made by Carl Dittmar. I've seen the pesky stuff, but who'd a' thought o' takin' it to use hide-huntin'? Nobody but that pesky critter!"

"Ef it works like that, it must be the boss!" half-sighed Spread Eagle Sam, as he settled himself to watch the further success of his rival. "No smoke—no noise—no nothin' but sure death every pop!"

"An' he was the critter that got skeered an' run away, you thought, critter!" sniffed Kirkendall, turning his head and looking around to wither Jesse Purchass with a single glance. "Hellow! Whar's the critter skulked to? No matter. His better is down thar; will you look at that, Sam? Don't it work jes' too sweet fer any use in life? Waal, I should remark!"

One by one the bulls were dropping, and so far as those watching the "stand" could tell, not one of them all had called for an extra shot. And as Spread Eagle Sam counted the slain, he saw that his "straight string" of the past day had already been surpassed!

"It does beat the—Dutch!" he muttered, ruefully rubbing his chin. "Waal," with a sigh, "ef I am to go down this bout, I couldn't be kivered over by a better man!"

"Mebbe ye won't, mate!" suddenly ejaculated Dike Widgdon, in poorly suppressed excitement. "Look at that gang o' bulls on the other side o' the coulee! See 'em toss thar heads an' paw up the dirt! They smell somethin'; kin the wind hev shifted so much as that?"

"Tain't his way they're lookin' at all," muttered the veteran, turning his glass toward the coulee. "Thar's somethin' in the draw that's rousted them up. Yit I cain't see—they ain't nothin' thar that I kin—Beauty-bird, what is it, gal?"

Divining the truth, Luada could not hide her emotions, and forgetting all else Morris Kirken-

dall turned to her, catching her in his arms, himself trembling with fear of what he knew not.

Spread Eagle Sam caught up the glass, but before he could raise it to his eye another shot came from the hidden hide-hunter, and with a scream that reached even his ears, a mass of dry grass was scattered high in the air, and the form of a human being was revealed near the head of the coulee, flinging aloft its arms, then reeling back to fall headlong!

"Jes'—it's the boy, by—"

Fiercely the words broke from the lips of the huge hunter, as he leaped to his feet, grasping his rifle.

"My love! they have murdered you!" shrieked Luada, then sinking limp and lifeless into the arms of her parent.

It was as well that oblivion came over her as it did, for she was spared a torturing sight.

Instead of turning in headlong flight, the mass of bellowing beasts turned their wickedly-armed heads and started at full speed directly toward the fallen man! If the bullet of his rival had spared aught of life, the remnant would speedily vanish beneath those terrible, trampling hoofs!

Only a miracle could save Jesse Purchass now!

CHAPTER XVIII.

STORMY SCENES IN CAMP.

YELLING at the top of his voice, Spread Eagle Sam plunged down the steep, rocky slope at the risk of his neck, slipping, sliding, starting a shower of rocks and gravel to bear him company in that mad effort to gain the plain and the front of the charging herd in time to save the body of Jesse Purchass from being trampled to jelly beneath the hoofs of the buffaloes.

But, desperate as were his actions, they must have failed in their purpose, only for the prompt and generous action of Laughing Leo. He flung aside his ingenious cover and leaped out from the hole, sending forth a swift succession of terrific yells as he dashed toward his fallen rival. He sent one shot from his rifle as he ran at full speed, and whether it was owing to chance, or through his marvelous skill, the leading bull dropped headlong in death.

Its companions mechanically checked their blind rush as they struck the kicking mass, and this gave Laughing Leo time to cross their front and reach the motionless body of his rival. One look he cast upon the bloody face, then, with a revolver in each hand, he confronted the bellowing beasts, shooting as rapidly as he could manipulate the weapons, shouting and screeching like mad the while.

"Whoop 'er up, good boy!" yelled Spread Eagle Sam, as he came near enough to use his pistols with effect.

And then, with his mighty lungs giving birth to the wildest, most ear-splitting shrieks, the herculean hide-hunter fairly charged the bulls in turn!

Struck in one eye and blinded by a pistol bullet, a leading bull gave a fierce bellow of pain and rage as it whirled toward the wounded side, rushing off with tail up, frantically. And the remainder of the "bunch" followed his example, sheering off when twenty yards more would have carried them over the senseless hide-hunter and his two bold defenders.

The laugh of Leo Laughlin rung out clear and distinct, even above the increasing uproar of the growing stampede, as he cried to his gigantic rival:

"Let up, Sam, or you'll scare them clean out of their hides; and as this is my stand, I'll claim them all as part of my score—sure!"

Spread Eagle Sam turned and strode back to the head of the shallow coulee, pausing and staring into the bloody face. His own face was pale and hard-set, his voice husky as he said:

"You played the fool an' the raskil, Jes', an' though I tuck ye nigher my ole heart then I ever did a man afore, I'd be lyin' ef I said I'm sorry to see ye layin' thar! It was a dog's trick you played, an' it's fitten you met a dog's pay!"

A clear, metallic laugh smote upon his ear, and turning, the big hide-hunter saw Laughing Leo standing with keen blue eyes fixed intently upon his face. Only for a moment; then the younger man stepped forward and extended his hand, saying:

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Ingalls, for I can see now how bitterly I wronged you at first. When I first caught sight of that—that fellow, I believed it to be you. For that reason I creased his skull, instead of boring it through and through. And yet, even as I pulled trigger, I could hardly think you were mean enough to play such a dirty trick on a fair rival!"

Spread Eagle Sam's face flushed hotly, his eyes fairly snapped, as he gruffly replied:

"I'm white, what they is of me, critter. Ef I couldn't beat ye fa'r, I wouldn't beat ye at all. An' the breath hain't hardly got cold yit that I wasted in warnin' Jesse Purchass he wouldn't never no more be pard o' mine ef he tried any underhand tricks to beat you in this match. He's done it. You salivated him fer it. I'm only

sorry ye didn't plump him dead-center when ye was about it. The pizen critter!"

"Still, he is a fellow-being, and must not be left here to perish for lack of assistance. Catch hold, Sam, and we'll carry him to the rocks."

"Billy-be-durned ef I tetch him, 'thout it is with a good rawhide!" snorted Sam, turning away in utter disgust.

Without a word, Laughing Leo dropped his rifle and picked the unconscious hide-hunter up in his arms, leaving the *coulee* and striding across the smoother ground as lightly and gracefully as though the weight he carried was no more than that of an infant. Spread Eagle Sam picked up the discarded rifle and followed after, his face gloomy, his whole demeanor that of one who has been wounded in his tenderest parts by a loved one.

Scarcely had Laughing Leo reached the edge of the broken ground when Luada Kirkendall, pale, her hair disheveled, her face bearing a wild, half-distracted expression, rushed frantically toward them, followed by the panting, cursing, pleading old trader, whose wooden leg threatened to break his neck at every stride he made.

Laughing Leo quickly but gently lowered the body to the ground, retreating a pace or two, just as Luada reached the spot, dropping on her knees beside Purchass, lifting his head and pressing it against her bosom as she cried, brokenly:

"My love—my own! They have murdered you—and with you, me! Heaven's blackest curse rest upon the one who dared to shed your blood! On your head, Leo Laughlin!" and she turned upon him, one blood-stained hand raised against him.

Laughing Leo uttered not a word in self-defense. He saw Morris Kirkendall rushing upon his child, his face fairly convulsed with anger, his huge hands doubled up as though he was bent on annihilating them both, and fearing for the result, he caught him around the body from behind, lifting him clear of the ground, holding him thus, kicking at a rare rate with his wooden leg, and sputtering savagely:

"Beauty-bird, you contrary critter, you! Come out o' that, or you'll sup sorrow! The dirty varmint! You ain't no child o' mine ef you kin slobber over him after playin' such a durned low-down dirty trick as them—no you ain't!"

With a cry that was half a sob, half an accusation, Luada turned her head to face her angry parent.

"Living, you cursed and tyrannized over him—and now that he is dead, murdered while doing my bidding, you still can find words to slander and abuse!"

"Beauty-bird—gal—durn ye, critter! let me down! How kin I talk when you got me trussed up like a—ugh!"

His feet struck the ground, but Laughing Leo still held him with a grasp which he was unable to break, had he given his entire strength to that end. But he made no further effort to free himself. The words of his daughter had just penetrated his confused senses, and he stammered:

"You—doin' what you tolle him, Beauty-bird?"

Luada pressed her pale lips to the blood-stained face, then gently lowered her head to the ground, rising to her feet and almost fiercely confronting them. Her eyes fairly flamed and her face was literally transfigured.

"From the very first, you have all been against him, and you, father, the very hardest, most unmerciful of all! And why? Because he dared to love me! Ah, father! Perhaps if you had been less harsh, less peremptory, more tender and more confidential, naught of this would have arisen between us. I did not love him then, nor did I ever think of him as a possible lover until I learned you had driven him from our door with curses and abuse for daring to say he loved me! Only for that—only for your giving me cause to think of him with regret and sympathy—I might never have thought again of him!"

"Luada, child, you fergit yourself!" muttered Kirkendall.

With a passionate gesture she interrupted him.

"Father, I must speak, and you must hear me out! Stop!" she hastily cried as Laughing Leo, releasing the trader, was about to move away in company with Spread Eagle Sam. "You too must listen to my defense of the man you have murdered and now would blacken the record of, even in death!"

"Father, you not only reviled Jesse Purchass, but you made your only child love him, better than life itself! And then, when you discovered this fact, you did your best to make her wretched and miserable for life!"

"Beauty-bird, don't!" muttered the trader, his face showing how deeply her hard, plain speech stung him.

"Is it not true? You knew how deeply I feared and disliked this man they call Laughing Leo. You yourself professed to feel a strong aversion for him; yet you set me up as a prize for him to shoot for, swearing that should he win, I should become his wife, whether I consented or not!"

"Better him or Sam then that dirty whelp!" sullenly grated Kirkendall, his grief beginning to change back to anger.

"In my eyes, one single hair from his head outweighs them both combined! Heaven's blackest curse rest on the hand that laid him low in death! He was only doing my bidding. I begged him to foil that laughing demon, yonder! I begged him as he loved me—as he hoped to one day make me his wife—to try and foil the smiling devil who had sworn to win me, yes or no! For my sake he made the venture—for my sake he dared your abuse, his lead, and met his death! Oh! Jesse, my love, my husband, my all! that I might die with you!"

She sunk upon her knees beside the motionless body, covering her face with her blood-stained hands, sobbing as though her heart would burst.

Laughing Leo stepped to her side, kneeling and lifting the head of the young hide-hunter, placing the mouth of a liquor flask between his lips, saying calmly, positively:

"Miss Kirkendall, your grief is somewhat premature. This man is alive, and within ten minutes he will be able to tell you as much with his own lips."

Luada started and stared incredulously at the speaker, but then, as a faint moan came from the lips of the wounded man, she burst into a flood of tears, of joy this time.

Laughing Leo gently touched her arm, adding:

"If you will permit me, Miss Kirkendall, I will—"

With a fierce motion she flung off his hand, turning upon him with wildly flashing eyes as she cried:

"Away, you bloodhound! Have you not done injury enough? Touch him or me again with but the tip of a finger, and I will stain my hands with blood—if blood there flows in the veins of a demon!"

With a low, cold bow, Laughing Leo rose and stepped back.

Morris Kirkendall was gradually working himself up into a passion, and now he took his turn, only to be stunned with:

"Nor you—father of mine no longer! No father would set up his only child for ruffians and villains to shoot for! You have canceled all debts of gratitude, and I owe you naught. Go—leave me alone with my love! If death claims him, I will help to pay the debt. If he lives, he shall owe it to me alone, not to his bitterest enemies!"

Laughing Leo led Morris Kirkendall away with gentle force, fearing lest he, in his anger, should make a bad matter worse. And as he moved off, he whispered:

"Grant her a little time, my dear sir. She is hysterical now, and does not realize the full force of her words."

"Ef I didn't think the same, durned ef I wouldn't feel tempted to take her 'crost my checkered apron, child-fashion!"

At a respectful distance they watched the young couple. They saw Jesse Purchass gradually recovering his senses and strength. They saw Luada bathing his wound with the brandy in the flask which Laughing Leo had left with them, then binding it up as well as she could with her handkerchief. And then, slowly, feebly at first, they saw the young hide-hunter move away in the direction of the temporary camp, supported by the arm of the woman who so fiercely rejected all assistance.

Reaching the camp, Luada placed blankets for Jesse to lie on, and giving him water to drink, she sat down beside him, her position such as almost cut off all view of the wounded hide-hunter from beyond.

All this time Spread Eagle Sam had been strangely quiet and grave, scarcely for a moment removing his gaze from the face or form of his *protege*. But now that he was fairly settled and apparently in a fair way to recover, the giant hide-hunter faced Laughing Leo and spoke in tones that could not escape the hearing of Jesse Purchass or any other in the camp.

"Critter, look at me! I want to say once more that I didn't hev no han' or part in this dirty trickery. The man I used to call my side pardner done it all, fur's I know, of his own a'cord. Fer that, as I warned him I would, I set him aside from now on as too low-down an' mean fer a white'man to keep comp'ny with, much less make a pard out of.

"I loved the dirty whelp so much that I was shootin' fer him. Ef I won, I was goin' to make the boss give him the little lady fer a wife, 'cordin' to his promise. But now—much as I love her fer her mother's sake an' mem'ry, I'd ruther see her laid in her grave then to mate with *that* critter! You was in a fa'r way to beat my score, when he cut in an' sp'iled your chainte. You hed beat me as fur's you got. I b'lieve you would 'a' beat me to the eend, on'y fer him. An' b'lievin' this as I do, I own up that you're a better man then I be. You've won the match, an' I'm goin' to hunt another nest jes' as soon as I kin put ye in persession. Shake, boss!"

"Good boy, Sam!" cried Kirkendall, heartily. "Ef you hedn't said like that, durned ef I wasn't g'wine to lick you myself."

"An' you, Laughlin, lis'en to me a bit: You've won the match, through a foul. You would 'a' won it anyhow, I do b'lieve, even ef that pizen critter hedn't stuck in his dirty nose! You kin ax what you want most in place o' the

promise I give, an' by the bulls o' Bashan! I'll see that you git it, too! Pritty pass ef a gal's to fly in the face o' her nat'ral born daddy like this! 'Deed it jes' is, now, I tell ye!"

"And I tell you that death shall claim me before *he* does!" coldly uttered Luada, her eyes flashing. "I hate him—I love Jesse Purchass! His wife I will be, or I die a maid!"

Morris Kirkendall raged and fumed, but Luada was not to be frightened nor shaken from her position. She stubbornly declined to move from that spot until Jesse Purchass was able to bear her company, and at length the old trader was forced to give way to her indomitable will.

It was a gloomy camp that evening. Luada herself cooked food for Jesse, and would hold no communication with any of the rest. Laughing Leo left the party and camped by himself at a little distance. Spread Eagle Sam was strangely silent and down-hearted, while Morris Kirkendall was, figuratively, sitting on nettles all the time.

At length silence fell over the little camp, and it seemed as though all hard feelings were lost for the time being under the soothing influence of sleep. But this was only in outward seeming. There were strange doings in camp that dark night!

As usual with him, since he reached his old stamping-grounds, Morris Kirkendall was one of the first people to rouse up in the morning. He kindled up the fires, and then, with all his parental love sharpened by the memory of the first serious quarrel which had ever risen between him and his idolized child, he looked around for Luada, really meaning to ask her pardon for his harsh words of the day before—looked, but failed to discover aught of her!

Even then he did not suspect the truth, but with growing impatience as his quest proved fruitless, he lifted his voice:

"Lu—Beauty-bird! whar in the name o' King David's gran'mother hev you gone to? Luada, I say!"

Only the dull echoes answered him, but his loud cries awakened the rest of the camp, and soon all were afoot. Spread Eagle Sam was busiest in looking around for the missing girl, but Laughing Leo stood moodily by one of the blazing fires, his arms folded, his face pale, his eyes glittering like jewels.

And when Morris Kirkendall, half distracted, asked him if he had seen or heard anything of the missing one, he coldly responded:

"Is she the only one missing? Where's Jesse Purchass?"

The father stared at him for a moment in bewilderment, then a wild, choking cry burst from his lips as he gasped:

"My darlin'—run off with that dirty whelp! Oh, God!"

CHAPTER XIX.

LOVE'S MADNESS.

THE old man staggered blindly, and before either Laughing Leo or Spread Eagle Sam could reach him, he fell to the ground, quivering and shaking like one with the epilepsy.

The herculean hide-hunter sprung to his assistance, but Laughing Leo stood quietly by, a cold, hard smile upon his face. To all appearance the flight of Luada Kirkendall had stricken him as sorely as the trader, though after a different fashion.

"Look around an' see what you kin find out, mate," Spread Eagle muttered to his recent rival as he lifted Kirkendall in his mighty arms and bore him over to the spot where he had passed the night. "Ef he comes to, that'll be the fu'st thing he'll ax."

Loving Leo moved slowly away, but he did not join in the wild, aimless movements of the rest of the party. He sat on a rock, steadily puffing a cigar, his brows knitted, his face showing hard as stone in the flickering light of the nearest camp-fire.

And thus he still sat when Spread Eagle Sam came from the side of Morris Kirkendall, whose senses had slowly returned to him, and whose one cry and thought was for his rash child—his Beauty-bird.

"It's a dead sure thing, then, is it?" huskily muttered the big hide-hunter as he found his rival thus. "The little lady hev gone off with that cussed whelp? Ef I on'y hed my ten fingers onto his thrapple jes' now—wouldn't I?"

"Sure as fate. Did you have any doubt, even at the first?"

There was something in the tone of the speaker that caused Sam to look keenly into his face—something he saw there that made his own face flush and his eyes to fill with a half-threatening light. Laughing Leo saw this, and his red lips curled with a half-mocking laugh.

"Never mind asking the question, dear feller. I did know of this latest freak long before the old gentleman made the discovery. Indeed, I believe I saw how the affair would probably end before the little lady herself realized it."

"Say it ag'in, an' say it slow, mate," muttered Sam.

"I was awake last night when the couple took French leave. I saw them make their preparations; I saw them steal out of camp and secure their horses; I saw them lead the animals

away foot by foot, fearful of alarming the camp; I saw them mount and ride off—on their wedding tour, let us hope!"

"You saw it—you knew it all an' yit you didn't say a word to save the little lady?" incredulously cried Sam.

Leo laughed, harshly, flinging out one hand with an impatient gesture that told how thin was his composure.

"Put yourself in my boots, Sam, and you can answer that question without stopping to think twice! Remember what she said only a few hours before. Remember how she regarded me. If I had checked their flight, she would have thought I did so to save myself an unwilling bride?"

"But to let her run off with him!"

"She loves him, and he her—how could he help it?" and for the first time Laughing Leo showed agitation in his voice. "She swore she would be his bride or death's. What could I do? Simply hold my peace and wish them good-speed!"

Morris Kirkendall, weak, terribly shaken, looking many years older than he had but a single day before, now tottered from his rude couch and Spread Eagle Sam broke the bitter news to him as gently as possible.

"Mebbe they hain't gone fur—mebbe the little lady has altered her mind—mebbe we'll find 'em at the wagons," he added, not through his own belief, but in hopes of giving the sorely shaken father at least a brief respite from despair.

He eagerly caught at the frail hope, and called for his horse. Sam vainly endeavored to coax him to remain while he rode on for news; tried to convince him that he was far too weak for the ride, coming so soon after his shock; but all in vain. The old man muttered, tremblingly:

"No, boy, I'm goin' fu'st of all. It's her daddy she'll want to see fu'st. Your faces'd come more like those of a perleece—she'd feel as though I'd sent a warrant a'ter her."

And so, pale and trembling, but borne up by a wild, unsubstantial hope, Morris Kirkendall led the way out of the rocky pass and over the level ground back to where the wagons had been left under guard the day before. And as he drew near the spot where Spread Eagle Sam made his big score in that unlucky match, he motioned his companions back, muttering:

"Me fu'st, critters! All o' you to onces would skeer the pore little child! It's fer her sake I ax it, not mine."

He rode ahead at a gallop, his once sturdy form bowed in the saddle, swaying with weakness, and Laughing Leo muttered:

"The shock will about kill the poor fellow! Better have broken the whole truth to him at once! Keep close behind him, Sam, to do what you can. He places the most trust in you."

And so it was that Morris Kirkendall entered the camp, with Spread Eagle Sam close behind him. He cast one swift look around, and felt his last hope vanishing forever, for he could see no signs of Luada or of Jesse Purchass.

With a desperate effort he steadied his reeling brain and huskily cried to the staring man before him:

"Hev you see'd anythin' o' her—Miss Kirkendall?"

"Waal, she was here airy this mornin', an' she—"

"Now—where is she now?" gasped Kirkendall.

"She rid off long o' young Purchass! Good Lawd!"

With a hollow groan the trader reeled in his saddle, and only for the quick aid of Spread Eagle Sam, he would have fallen headlong to the ground.

He lay like a dead man, only for that horrible quivering motion, and as Spread Eagle Sam bore him over to the still standing tent, tears of honest grief and sympathy were running down over the long yellow beard. It was a sad sight, that father's anguish, and Sam's heart was as tender as it was big.

"Durned ef I didn't think they was somethin' wrong when the lady routed us out airy," confidentially said the guard to Laughing Leo, as the remainder of the party came up and dismounted. "But she was the real boss, ever sense we left St. Paul, an' when she give me the note an' said—"

"A note? Where is it?" sharply interrupted Laughing Leo.

"I was goin' to tell the boss when he keeled over," apologetically muttered the guard as he produced the missive.

It was directed to Morris Kirkendall and sealed. Laughing Leo seemed on the point of opening it, but then held his hand as he saw Spread Eagle Sam emerge from the tent.

Morris Kirkendall was lying in a sort of stupor, something similar to the one that had come over him when he first realized the flight of his idolized child. Spread Eagle Sam believed it would gradually pass away after the same manner, and as he had done all that lay in his power, he came forth to learn the truth of the matter.

In silence Laughing Leo handed him the note. Sam did not hesitate a moment in breaking the seal. He felt almost as if he were the father

of the rash child, and time might be of the greatest value if they hoped to save her from further misery.

Slowly he spelled out the few hastily written lines:

"Father, when you read this I will be far beyond your reach. I wish I might take your blessing with me, but after your harsh words last night, I see the folly of entertaining any such hope. You swore that I should marry that laughing demon. Death would be preferable, even were I heart-free. But I am not. I love Jesse Purchass as he loves me, and when you and I meet again, I will be his wife!"

"It will be vain for you to follow. We travel light, and even if overtaken, I will die before you shall tear me from him—my love, my husband!"

There was neither address nor signature, but neither were needed. Surely the language was plain enough!

"He mustn't see this, leastwise not until he's stronger than he'll be this day or two to come," moodily uttered Sam, as he refolded the note and carefully concealed it upon his person. "Course he must know she's gone, but them hard words would nigh kill the pore ole man. Ef I on'y hed my grip onto that durned sneak! An' to think I called him *my pard!*"

A cold, metallic laugh parted the lips of his companion.

"Don't forget what she said, old fellow. If she had begged me or you to do the same thing, under similar circumstances, I fear neither one of us would have had the moral courage to deny her. *By her love!* That would tempt an angel to sin!"

"But he needn't a' run off like this!" growled Sam.

"But he did—and she went with him willingly, as I can bear evidence. That she did so, settles the matter with me. I never cross a lady in her whims, be they ever so strange and unaccountable. I will not do so now. She bids us abandon all pursuit. I mean to obey. If you are wise, you will do the same thing, my dear fellow!"

"It's fer him to say," muttered Sam, rising and striding back to the tent where Morris Kirkendall lay in a stupor that would have closely resembled death, only for that peculiar, convulsive twitching and shivering.

Laughing Leo listened to the eager conversation of the men, but there was not much more to learn than the note conveyed. Only that Luada with Jesse Purchass had reached the camp before daylight, and taking a few articles in a couple of bundles, tied behind their saddles, left the note and galloped rapidly away in the direction of the hide-master's dug-out.

It was late in the afternoon when Morris Kirkendall awoke from that heavy stupor, and when his eyes opened they fell upon a strangely triumphant face beside him—a face that drew a faint, trembling cry from his lips:

"It's the she wolf! come to haunt me as she swore she would! Take her away! Take her away!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the owner of that face, her voice mellow and musical, but sounding like harsh croakings of a malignant fate to the trembling trader. "Let them try it, Morris Kirkendall! I am mistress here, my darling husband!"

Spread Eagle Sam stepped forward, his face and voice both troubled, his strong hand trembling as he mechanically scratched his chin—his favorite action when sorely puzzled.

"Ef you please, ma'am, the boss ain't fit fer—"

"If you please, gawky, keep your distance and speak when you are spoken to!" snapped the virago, turning upon the big hide-hunter so sharply that he beat a hasty retreat. Laughing Leo stood his ground, his arms folded across his bosom, a hard look upon his face, his lips tightly compressed.

"My business is with Morris Kirkendall, and the first dog among you who dare interfere before my pleasure, will sup sorrow!" she cried, shaking a clinched fist at Laughing Leo, who merely smiled, without moving another muscle.

"Livin'—she ain't! It's a lie! It's a cheat!" muttered Morris Kirkendall, brushing a hand across his eyes as though expecting to obliterate the unwelcome vision. "I see her dead an' rotten! I buried her deep—so deep nobody but the devil himself would take the trouble to hunt her up when the crack o' doom come! Dead—I say she's dead an' in—!"

"If so, I've come back for you, dear husband!" laughed the She Wolf, mockingly. "But you're wrong. See! does that feel like the touch of dead lips?" and she suddenly stooped over him and touched her hot lips to his sweat-beaded brow!

He shrunk back with a low, gasping groan. Surely this was no ghost! She still lived! It was bitterer than death to him for one brief breath—then his old hatred gave him strength to stagger to his feet and try to clutch her throat.

It was only a spasmodic gesture, and he sunk back again, helpless; but it was sufficient to bring a shade of terror even to her cheeks, and she spoke rapidly, with less of mockery:

"Yes, Morris Kirkendall, I am still alive. I swore I would not die until I had full and complete revenge upon you for all you made me suffer; and now I have dealt my first blow!"

A frightful suspicion seized upon him, and he gasped:

"You ain't—no! the good Lord wouldn't let you do it!"

"The good devil governs my movements, my dear husband!" she laughed, mockingly, but warily watching his slightest move. "As a proof, listen for a few moments.

"I foiled you. I made you believe me dead. I kept far away from your circle, for many years only asking to be let alone. But then, as I began to grow old and to think what the future might have in store for me, I remembered you. I cautiously made inquiries, and discovered that you had made another fortune; that you had married, and though now a widower, you were blessed with a beautiful daughter.

"I resolved to have a share of your gold. I had a very dear son, and resolved to provide for him, also. And my first move, I sent him to gain your confidence, and her love. Ah!" and she smiled with satanic glee as Morris Kirkendall half-rose from his couch. "You begin to guess the truth? You see now how utterly you have been befooled? Ay! your suspicions are well founded; *the man you know as Jesse Purchass, is my son!*"

It was a terrible blow, and Morris Kirkendall was too weak to bear up against it. One convulsive effort to leap at her throat, then he sunk back, senseless. Spread Eagle Sam rudely brushed past the She Wolf, and bent over him anxiously.

"Never fear, big fellow," she cried, jeeringly. "He's not dead. He'll live to feel something of the torture which he inflicted upon me!"

"Go your way, woman, ef woman you be!" muttered Sam, harshly. "Go your way afore I fergit that you be a woman!"

"When I have completed my mission, not before. To you I say the rest; tell him when he recovers.

"I hold his daughter in my power. My son took her to me early this morning. Tell him that when he transfers to me the Government bonds he holds—\$100,000—that I will send him back his daughter. I will come for his answer at your dug-out in three days from now.

"If he refuses to do this, he will never see her again; or, if he does, he will rather gaze upon her corpse! Tell him I said this, and he will need no more definite threat. He knows what I am capable of, from sad experience. Ha! ha! ha!"

"And if we choose to hold you as a hostage for her, what then?" coldly uttered Laughing Leo, his eyes glowing vividly.

"Bah! do you take me for an idiot to come into his presence, without a safeguard?" sneered the woman. "If I do not return within a certain length of time—if I am followed or if you make the slightest effort to find and rescue the girl before he has paid her ransom—she dies a thousand deaths in one!"

She spoke so boldly, so confidently, that Laughing Leo fell back, like one stunned. She laughed again, adding:

"Tell him all this, big fellow. Tell him that not one penny less can buy her freedom with remaining honor. Tell him I will come or send for his decision, in three days from now."

She said no more, but glided out of the tent and over to where a magnificent horse awaited her. She leaped into the saddle with the activity and grace of an athlete, riding in the manner best suited to her man's saddle and masculine garb. She cast a kiss from the tips of her fingers toward the two men standing in the door, crying:

"If followed, *she dies!* Remember!"

She rode rapidly away from the camp through the deepening twilight, and as she disappeared, Laughing Leo strode to his horse, throwing on saddle and bridle. With a short cry, Spread Eagle Sam caught him by the arm.

"Whar you goin', man? Didn't you hear what she said?"

"I am going to rescue Miss Kirkendall, or die!" sternly replied Laughing Leo, freeing his arm and leaping in the saddle.

"It'll kill her, ruther! Come back, durn ye!" and Spread Eagle Sam jerked a revolver from his belt. "Come back, or I'll blow ye through, sure's fate!"

"Shoot if you dare! The shot that kills me, kills her!" and Laughing Leo flashed back a flaming glance, then rode off on the trail of the She Wolf.

And Spread Eagle Sam dropped his pistol, afraid to shoot!

CHAPTER XX.

LAUGHING LEO CLAIMS HIS PRIZE.

"MAJOR JACK, I like a fool, but you will suit me too well!"

Lena Burvenich, the "She Wolf" of Morris Kirkendall, was the speaker, and she addressed the ex-officer whom we have seen in her company on a prior occasion.

Now it was night, and in addition to a large, blazing fire of wood, two huge swinging lamps filled with melted grease and twisted rags for a wick, cast a reddish light over them.

They were in an underground retreat, rude,

rough, and almost entirely unfurnished. A pallet of skins and blankets lay near the fire, and upon this the amazon was half-reclining as she snapped out the words which open this chapter.

As she spoke she sprung to her feet, her face flushed, her eyes glittering, her magnificent figure full of life and passion. One white, be-ringed hand was actually thrust into the face of the pale, haggard-eyed soldier, who watched her so sadly, so moodily—with the look which one might give a creature whom he loved, even while despising.

Lena Burvenich turned abruptly away from him to a small and rude stand against the wall, on which stood a couple of bottles and a metal drinking-cup. Twice in succession she filled the cup and tossed off the strong-smelling liquor as though it were no more powerful than clear water.

"You are drinking too much, Lena," gravely uttered Westgate, stepping forward and resting a hand upon her bared arm. "Your brain is on fire, and you are more than half-crazed as it is. Listen to reason, and—"

She flung off his hand with a chilling oath. He fell back, pained, troubled. She laughed harshly at this, and cried:

"Does that shock you, Major Jack? Bah! Wait until you see the She Wolf in her true colors—wait until you see her when she can't strip off the mask for good and all! Then you may well shrink away and look for shelter until the storm blows over!"

"I shall never shrink from you, Lena—not even though you were to strike straight at my heart with a weapon as keen and cutting, but more quickly fatal, as your tongue. You are not accountable for your words or actions of late, and in my great love for you I can overlook almost anything."

"Which is why I call you a fool, Major Jack," she retorted, with a hard, scornful laugh that should have effectually opened his eyes. "You persist in thinking me little short of being an angel, when I tell you I am a very devil from the hottest corner of Hades! Ha! ha! It is gloriously refreshing to be able to tell the plain truth sometimes! A devil—I'm the very queen and empress of all the devils! Do you hear?"

She looked at him with a half-drunk leer, and poured out another cup of brandy. With a quick motion he took the cup from her fingers, drained it, then cast the cup in one corner where the gloom hid it from view. She did not appear to notice his action, speaking rapidly:

"You call me crazed! Maybe I am. My blood has been boiling and my brain filled with liquid fire ever since I saw him—ever since I stood in the presence of Morris Kirkendall and struck him helpless with my curse! I did not say nearly all I wanted to say, before the old fool gave way and wilted! I wanted to tell him all how I meant to torture his dainty child, but he was too weak. Bah! what poor fools you men are, the very best of you!"

"Never mind. What I would have told him, I can show you. I'll have the girl up and make her perform for our amusement. Major Jack, we will be king and queen, and she shall be our slave girl, to dance and posture, to—"

"Lena, you will not do this," he uttered gravely, taking her by the arm. "You are not yourself, now, and—"

"Didn't I say so?" she laughed, trying to free her arm, and as she found this impossible, her eyes beginning to flash viciously, her tones changing as well. "Beware, fool, how you cross me! He called me the she wolf—mind you don't get a fatal taste of her fangs! Again—let me go!"

"Lena, will you listen to me?" he added, soberly. "It is for your own good that I—"

She grasped one of the half-emptied bottles and struck him fairly in the face with all the power of her arm. The bottle was shattered to pieces. He released her arm, staggering back, his face terribly cut and gashed, blood flowing freely from his injuries. But he uttered no cry, no word of anger or of reproach as he met her frantic rage with a steady front.

She caught up the second bottle and seemed about to hurl it at his head, but that steady, sad, grave look disarmed her, and the heavy missile dropped to the rock floor, breaking and pouring out its vile contents unheeded.

"I warned you—you would interfere!" she muttered, her bloodshot eyes sinking, half-abashed before that sad gaze.

"It was not you, Lena. When the evil spirit leaves you, no one will regret this outburst more than you, I know."

He turned and left the rock room to have the freely flowing blood stanch.

She paced back and forth through the narrow, irregular apartment, her brows knit, her hands convulsively working, muttering incoherently to herself for some time. Then, rousing herself with a start, she caught a long, limber rawhide from where it hung against the wall, making it hiss and whistle as she swept it through the air.

"Maybe that will cool my fevered blood a little! I'll try it, anyhow! She's his child—maybe he'll feel the blows on his own heart as they score her dainty shoulders!"

She passed along the narrow, winding passage

until it abruptly widened out into an almost square apartment, lighted as was the one she had just left, by rude, home-made lamps.

In one corner was a rude pallet of dry grass and a single blanket. On this poor resting-place half-reclined a girl who cast aside the blanket and struggled to a sitting posture on the entrance of the She Wolf.

It was Luada Kirkendall, but little more than the shadow of the bright, rosy, healthy-looking girl whom we have thus far been accustomed to see.

Less than forty-eight hours had passed since she wrote that hasty, cruel note to her father, but in that comparatively brief interval, Luada had suffered untold agony. Her tortures could partly be realized by noting the pallor and thinness of her face; by the wild, terrified look in her eyes; by the terror-stricken manner in which she shrank back as the merciless She Wolf came nearer, shaking the limber rawhide before her white, haggard face.

"How like ye the opening of the honeymoon, Beauty-bird?" she cried mockingly, making the sharp point of the whip hiss close to those shivering features. "Does the gallant bridegroom treat you as tenderly as you expected?"

"Where is he? What have you done with him?" gasped Luada.

"A pretty question for a blooming bride to ask another woman!" mocked the She Wolf. "But I will answer you. He is with his wife and child, laughing with them over your blind folly, repeating all your tender speeches and—"

"You lie, woman!" indignantly cried Luada, the bitter taunts giving her courage to face her tormentor.

"The lie—to me, and from your father's child!" snarled the amazon, for the time being little better than a madwoman. "Haven't I broken in your temper yet? Haven't you had enough of my gentle caresses to understand that I am all in all here—that you are my slave, to use or abuse as my own sweet will dictates? If not—take that and that!"

Twice in swift succession she struck with the cruel rawhide, each blow bringing blood from the neck of poor Luada. A wild shriek was extorted by the pain, and the helpless captive cowered before the termagant, begging for mercy.

Instead, there came only curses and revilings too horrible to find record here, and again the cruel whip was raised—only to be wrested from her frantic grasp by Major Jack.

"You—you dare to interfere with me, dog!" she grated, her eyes ablaze as she whirled upon him, one hand dropping to the weapons at her waist.

"It is for your sake, quite as much as hers, Lena," he replied, sadly, but firmly. "When you fully recover your senses you will thank me for saving you from such degradation!"

"I thank you now—and thus, dog!" the She Wolf snarled, her words blending with the sharp report of a revolver which she cocked and discharged even as she snatched it from her belt; a veritable snap-shot, but it was enough.

The red blood stained his left breast as the ex-officer sunk to the floor. There was a smile upon his lips, and forgiveness in his eyes as they met her furious glare.

"Lena—thanks!" he gasped, faintly. "Life a torture—better death. I forgive—I love you—Lena—good—"

His head fell back and there came a horrible rattling sound in his throat for a few moments. Then, as all grew still, the murderer uttered a wild cry and sprung to his side, kneeling there and lifting his head, unheeding the man who darted past her and stooped over the bound captive.

Alarmed by the pistol-shot, the members of the She Wolf's band came rushing to the spot with drawn weapons. They gave vent to cries of wonder and bewilderment as they caught sight of the strange tableau within the stone chamber.

A tall, handsome figure bore the half-unconscious form of Luada Kirkendall on his left arm. His right hand held a cocked revolver, the muzzle covering the woman who still knelt by the side of her victim. Her face was turned around and backward, but they could see the look of horror and amazement which it wore.

"Order them to drop their tools, or out goes your candle!" sternly cried Laughing Leo. "I hold your life at my finger's end. The first move they make toward me or you, seals your fate!"

The She Wolf was trembling like a leaf. She forgot the murdered man lying before her; forgot all save the great peril which threatened—so great that she could hardly articulate:

"Down weapons, men! For your lives do not touch him!"

"For her life, rather!" and the bold man laughed, musically, still keeping her covered. "Lay down your tools, fall into line and forward march! I'll act as rear guard, and your woman chief shall be our safeguard. Your first crooked motion puts her to death, and then the band will play for you all!"

"Obey—don't make him murder me!" gasped the She Wolf, completely cowed, and such was her influence over the band that they immedi-

ately dropped their weapons and held up their empty hands, as directed.

"So far, so good," Laughing Leo commented. "Now, my woman, get upon your feet. So! You understand the consequences of trying any tricks on yours truly. As you wear a masculine garb, I'll blow your brains out like a man, the first step you take over the line I mark out."

"You will lead the way to the outer air. I will follow, with this young lady, who has finished her visit to you. Your fellows may kill me, but they can't do it quick nor clean enough to hinder me from killing you as well. Act white, and I will turn you loose, the moment I can do so without running too great a risk for this young lady. Do you understand?"

"Yes," was the sullen reply. "I'll kill the first man who tries to stop your retreat!"

"Thanks, but I prefer to trust my own aim," was the cool retort. "Move on there, you sinners! And remember!"

It was a curious procession. A dozen men keeping step with each other, their hands elevated. The She Wolf following close behind, Laughing Leo holding a cocked revolver at her head, and supporting the half-swooning girl on his left arm.

Through the winding passage; through several rude chambers; then into the outer air.

"You fellows can go back to your den, and there wait for your chief," said Laughing Leo, coolly. "She has concluded to go a little distance with me, to guide us through the pitfalls and snares which we might otherwise stumble into. Good-night!"

The men hesitated, seemingly half-inclined to revolt, but as Laughing Leo clapped his pistol to the head of the She Wolf, she cried out to them:

"Do as he says. He has the upper hand now. Sometime—"

"No straying into side trails, if you please, Mistress She Wolf!" the handsome hide-hunter laughed, mockingly. "Let the future take care of itself, and bear your present peril a little more particularly in mind. Bid the gentlemen retreat."

She did so, shortly, sharply. And then Laughing Leo urged her away from the dangerous spot, guiding her footsteps to a couple of horses hidden in a thicket. He bade her mount one of these, and as she did so, he leaped into the saddle of his own good horse, holding Luada in his strong arms.

They rode rapidly away, Laughing Leo keeping a little in the rear, so as to control the actions of the She Wolf. And not until they had covered nearly two miles, did he halt.

"Dismount, if you please, madam," he said, grasping the rein of her horse. "Here we part company, and you can hurry back to your cubs as soon as you please. But take this warning with you: if you or yours make any further effort to kidnap this young lady, there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth among your friends! A word to the wise, you know, my dear woman!"

Without a word the She Wolf slipped from the saddle, but when her feet touched the earth her fiery spirit seemed to return, she and hissed, rather than exclaimed:

"I'll not forget you for this bit of work, my dandy fellow! You triumph now, but my turn will come sooner than you think, perhaps!"

"And perhaps not," he lightly laughed, as he cast a look into the pale face of Luada Kirkendall, who until now had made no motion, no sign of sensibility, though he knew that she had not swooned away.

He made a motion to transfer her to the other horse, when she surprised him by crying:

"Do not desert him! Oh, Mr. Laughlin! do not leave him in the power of that inhuman fiend!"

A dark frown came into the laughing face, and it was not lessened by the mocking jeer which broke from the lips of the She Wolf.

"You have the casket, but not the key to unlock it, Laughing Leo! The poor fool! how she clings to another woman's husband!"

"Whom do you wish me to rescue, Miss Kirkendall?" coldly inquired Laughing Leo.

"Jesse Purchass! She has him prisoner. I saw them knock him from his horse, and bear him away, bound and helpless! She has lied to me about him, to make my agony still more bitter!"

"I am sorry for you, Miss Kirkendall," he uttered, gravely. "I fear you have been terribly deceived by the very one who should have guarded you the most tenderly, the most carefully. This man you love is—but ask her who Jesse Purchass is!"

Bewildered, confused, unable to think for herself, Luada mechanically repeated the question Laughing Leo put in her mouth. The She Wolf seemed willing enough to answer her.

"Who is he? A man worth ten thousand of the smirking dandy who holds you in his arms! A man whose love the proudest woman in all the land might give her very soul to gain, and then count the bargain a rare one! Who is he? My son!"

Luada seemed stunned, and looked piteously into the face of Laughing Leo. He gravely bowed, without a word, then lifted her into the saddle of the other horse.

"You can go your way, now," he said, coldly, turning to the She Wolf. "But take with you my last warning. If you or any of your tools make any further attempt to injure Morris Kirkendall or his daughter, you will have to settle with me."

"You can threaten a disarmed woman, but wait until you meet my son! He will answer you for me as well as himself!"

She darted away through the gloom, and Laughing Leo, partly supporting Luada in her saddle, rode slowly away from the spot, heading toward the distant dug-out where Morris Kirkendall lay feebly calling on his beloved child to return to him.

CHAPTER XXI.

SPREAD EAGLE'S BEST SCORE.

"STIDDY, lads! thar's somebody a-comin'! I ketched a glimp' o' head as he crossed the ridge, yander. Ef it's Old Misery, all right. Ef it ain't—the critter must stop right here, an' never bark oncet—mind that!"

The speaker was Spread Eagle Sam, and the warning passed his lips with a sibilous sound that could not have been distinguished a rod distant. It was sufficiently plain to make the armed men who crouched in the thick gloom behind him, to lie still closer, each muscle ready for prompt and deadly action, should the occasion arise.

But it was not to come just then. A faint, peculiar chirp came to their ears, and with a sigh of relief, Spread Eagle Sam ejaculated:

"All right, pard; we're here an' waitin'."

Old Misery rose from his crouching position and rapidly advanced. Though the big hide-hunter asked him no question, the gentleman from Missouri readily divined his anxiety.

"They're thar, jes' as I thunk they would be!"

"In the ole hole?"

"Fer sure! In a hole like a rat-trap, with jes' the one road fer to git in or git out—the pizen fool critters! It won't be no credit to take sech-like to camp. I could do it my lonesome self, by takin' kiver an' starvin' 'em out!"

"Ef on'y the wicked ones would suffer; but while they was starvin', I don't reckon the little lady'd be gittin' very fat," commented Spread Eagle Sam, with a faint laugh.

Old Misery only grunted, and then delivered his report in a more concise form.

"I snaked cluss up to the door o' the trap, an' then lay low fer to see what the prospects was. I hearn talkin' that come from the holler in the hills, plain enough, an' puttin' the two things together, knewed that they must he the werry critters we was lookin' fer. You said I wasn't to run any extra resks, so I turned tail an' was comin' back here, when I ketched sound of a rumpus o' some sort inside.

"I thort it wouldn't do no harm to wait an' see what it all meant, but I didn't lose much time. I ketched a glimp' of one or two critters comin' from the d'rection o' the hole, an' I tried to snake closer to 'em. They tuck hoss an' rid off 'fore I could make 'em out fer sart'in."

"Not the hull gang didn't?" excitedly exclaimed Sam.

"They was on'y two hosses. The rest o' the critters went back to the hole, an' when I see this, I ups an' makes fer you—all quick as the cussed dark'd let me. Durn sech a kentry, anyway—longside o' good old Mizzouri!"

There was a brief silence after Old Misery concluded his report, then Spread Eagle Sam spoke, his tones low but those of a man who meant each and every syllable his tongue pronounced:

"Mates, you know what we set out to do. The chaince is afore us now, an' I'm goin' to grip it fer all that's out!"

"We're wid ye, ould mon!" said Johnny Bull, warmly.

"I hope ye all be, but I don't crowd any man into the row that'd rather stay out. They'll be fightin', no two ways 'bout it, an' more'n likely some o' us'll lose more blood then we kin spar. Them as wants to, kin hang back in the dark so the rest cain't see thar faces."

"An' I'll bate the back av thim till aich nose bl'ades foor viry shame, so I will, thin! Devil take me av I don't, now!"

"We'll rope your heels fu'st, an' then they won't be any runnin', to speak of," chuckled Old Misery.

"No time to waste in chaffin', boys," a little sharply interposed Spread Eagle Sam, as Donavan turned indignantly upon the gaunt Missourian. "Ef they's any white feathers in our crowd, words won't hold 'em up to the rack, an' the sooner they skin out, the better fer the rest."

"Now lis'en while I tell ye what we're goin' to do. I'm goin' to make a break right through the critters, tail on eend, an' never stop ontel I've found the little lady, or got to the furder eend o' the hole. The rest o' you'll Wade in an' shoot fer keeps. Don't give no quarter, fer you won't git none ef them critters come out top o' the heap."

"S'pose they drap you 'fore you kin git through 'em?"

"Ef I go down, Ole Misery an' Johnny Bull must take my place an' make red-hot fer the gal. Ef she ain't got to afore that woman-devil kin

chip in, she'll butcher her 'fore she lets us git her off."

Spread Eagle Sam did not stop to see what were the various opinions of his men regarding this plan, but at once bade Old Misery to lead the way to the retreat. In silence the gaunt Missourian obeyed. In silence he was followed.

It was the second night after the rash flight of Luada Kirkendall with Jesse Purchass, and a little more than four-and-twenty hours after the She Wolf paid that visit to Morris Kirkendall in the camp by the wagons.

As soon as he could fairly recover from the confusion into which the bold, dangerous action of Laughing Leo had cast him, Spread Eagle Sam bade Old Misery, as the craftiest, most skillful scout in the party, take the double trail and see if he could run it to a successful end.

Unfortunately night was close at hand, and as Old Misery was obliged to move on foot, in order to avoid discovery, he was soon foiled by the descent of darkness, and returned to camp to await the coming of daylight.

He and Sam had an earnest consultation that night, and Old Misery recalled to his memory the existence of the cave in the hills to the northeast of their present position. It was barely possible that their game might have sought refuge there, and while Spread Eagle Sam was to take Morris Kirkendall back to the dug-out in the spring wagon, Old Misery was to investigate the cavern.

Their hastily agreed upon plans were faithfully carried out. Morris Kirkendall was left at the dug-out, under care of the cook, while the rest lost no time in gaining the point where they were to meet Old Misery to hear his report.

Nothing had been seen or heard of Laughing Leo since he rode off on the trail of the She Wolf.

The party of rescuers advanced rapidly until Old Misery warned them that they were in the vicinity of the cavern, when they scattered a little and crept along silently as shadows.

They had almost blocked up the path to the cave, when the rapid sounds of human feet were heard, coming from the rear. Instinctively each man hugged the ground more closely, strong hands feeling for knife-hafts. A pistol-shot might ruin all their hopes of taking the enemy by surprise.

Then—there came a sharp cry in a feminine voice, and mingled with the quick scuffling came the hoarse, whining whisper of Old Misery:

"I've got her—Oh, Lawd!"

A revolver rang out, blending with a gasping groan from the lips of Old Misery. And by the momentary red glare of the burning powder, the startled hide-hunters saw their mate stagger back, throwing up his hands. Saw a momentary vision of the She Wolf—then heard her wild, mocking laugh and her flying footsteps, rushing toward the cave entrance.

"Run in on 'em, lads!" grated Spread Eagle Sam, as he set them the example, bounding with all his speed up the rocky slope and bursting through the leafy screen which fell before the entrance.

He was close at the heels of Lena Burvenich, who was shouting at the top of her voice, bidding her men defend the opening. He saw her turn toward him with leveled revolver, but with one mighty bound he passed her by, striking her aside with a single sweep of his mighty arm. He saw a number of human figures starting up before him—saw the red flashes and heard the wicked explosions of pistols and guns—felt the cruel twinges which follow the tearing of flesh and muscle; but he did not fall, did not falter for a moment. He broke through their ranks, hurling strong men aside as though they were but blades of grass, and then rushed at full speed along the narrow and winding passage, thinking only of rescuing the daughter of his employer, the child of the one woman whom he had loved since his earliest childhood days.

He heard the wild yells and oaths of men engaged in a struggle that could end only in death; heard the rattling of revolvers and the occasional louder explosion of rifles; but he gave them not a second thought as he hurried on through the narrow passages, through one enlargement after another, until he reached the last of all, where the cavern came to an abrupt termination. And a wild cry escaped his lips as he saw a recumbent figure in the gloomiest corner.

He leaped to its side, only to stand aghast, a fierce oath of wondering anger grating through his clinched teeth. It was not Luada Kirkendall whom he saw, but Jesse Purchass, the man whom he once loved and called pard—the man whom he had sworn to kill without mercy, whenever fate should bring them once more face to face.

Jesse Purchass, but bound hand and foot, looking more like a ghost than a successful schemer!

For one moment Spread Eagle Sam stood there with his revolver covering the helpless man; then he wheeled and rushed back the way he had come, thinking it barely possible he had passed Luada by unseen in his mad haste.

But this had not happened, as he was soon forced to admit. He saw nothing of her, and he reached the outer chamber, just as the wild

yell of victory went up from the throats of the hide-hunters!

He rushed into the rock-chamber, to see the last one of the rascals go down upon his knees with clasped hands, praying for mercy. He saw Kanuck, covered with blood, wounded but still active as a panther and to the full as blood-thirsty, leap upon him with ready knife, and had barely time to catch the falling arm and save the trembling wretch from instant death.

"You told-a we kill ze dam dogs! You say spar—a nosing at all!" hissed the half-breed, sullenly, but yielding.

"The gal's gone, an' he's got to tell whar an' how, fu'st," hastily replied Spread Eagle Sam, drawing his captive into one corner where he could more securely guard him from the infuriated victors.

If short, the conflict had been bloody in the extreme. It could be no less, when two such bands met each other in such narrow quarters. Not one of the She Wolf's band remained upon their feet, and she lay in the center of the floor, seemingly dead, her knife buried in the throat of a "skinner."

Spread Eagle Sam was far too anxious to learn what had befallen Luada Kirkendall to stop then to count up the cost of victory. Holding the trembling rascal by the arm, shoving the muzzle of a revolver into his face, he grated:

"Whar's the lady you devils stole from our camp? Talk straight, or off goes the top o' your head in a holy minnit!"

"Gone—rescued!" gasped the fellow, shrinking as far from the weapon as that mighty grasp would permit.

"Who tuck her, an' when? Look out, critter! Ef I ketch ye in a lie, salt won't save ye from sp'ilin'!"

"Laughing Leo, the boys called him. I don't know him. He hasn't been gone more than an hour, I should say."

"Ha! ha! Big devil!" cried a choking, yet mocking voice, as the She Wolf feebly raised herself to a sitting posture and shaking a bloody hand toward the startled hide-hunter. "You lose, even as you think the game is won! Find the girl, if you can—but find her quick, if you would not be forever too late to do her any good. Find her, you big devil!"

A hard, merciless light came into the eyes of the giant hide-hunter, and he beckoned to Kanuck, bidding him stand guard over the captured outlaw. Grinning as though he only wished the wretch would attempt to escape, or make even the slightest motion that could be thus construed, Jean La Vic stood over his prisoner with bloody knife in readiness.

Spread Eagle Sam stooped over the wounded woman, unheeding her vicious blows and clutching, satisfying himself that she was unarmed and not mortally injured. He bore her, still fighting him like an enraged cat, to the pallet in one corner, then spoke sternly, deliberately:

"Critter—fer I won't insult the good ole mother that bore me by callin' sech as you a woman. Critter, you've said too much not to say more. You've got to tell me all you mean 'bout Miss Kirkendall, or I'll wring your heart till it bleeds!"

"Torture me? Bah! big devil, I spit at you! and she actually did so. "I am a woman, but you can't make me speak when I wish to hold my tongue."

"I won't tortur' you in your own body, critter. You hev the shape of a woman, ef nothin' else, an' that saves you frem even a tech o' my finger in the way o' tortur'. But I've got your son a pres'ner, an' I'll tear him limb from limb afore the two eyes o' ye, ef you cain't be made to speak sooner."

"A lie! My son is far away an' safe from—"

Spread Eagle Sam did not wait to hear the conclusion of her husky speech, but strode away and soon returned with Jesse Purchass, still bound and helpless, in his arms. He stood him up before the woman, drawing his knife, as he said:

"Doin' is better then talkin'. Hyar he is. Speak out in plain United States, or I'll skin the critter alive!"

To his utter amazement, she burst into a mocking laugh.

"Do it—do it, and I'll laugh in perfect time to his groans and shrieks of agony! Bah! you big idiot! Do you think I would own a poor weakling like that for a son?"

"Before Heaven I am no relation to her!" gasped Jesse.

"Don't I say so?" laughed the She Wolf. "My son! he is worth a million such puny abortions! He is a man, every inch! He is at liberty, and he has taken the dainty doll you seek with him. I wish you joy of what she will be when you find her—if you ever do!"

Spread Eagle Sam stared from one face to the other, in a serious doubt what to think or do. The She Wolf laughed again.

"Poor dullard! cannot you see through it yet?"

"Sam, as Heaven hears me, I speak the truth when I accuse the demon we know as Laughing Leo of being the son of that she devil! He has played us false all the time! She captured me and stole Luada, through his orders! She admitted as much to me, only this very day!"

"It is true, big rascal," more calmly added the She Wolf. "The game is played, and though I lose, my son wins, so I need not fear to tell all. He is my son, the man you know as Laughing Leo. He laid the plans which I have carried out. He has taken the child of that boorish fool, Morris Kirkendall, and in a manner that will make her regard him as little less than a demi-god. He will use or abuse her, as the fancy takes him; but of one thing be sure; he will terribly avenge his mother on you, one and all!"

With an activity which no one expected from her in her seemingly helpless state, she leaped to her feet, tore the knife from the belt of the nearest hide-hunter, and before a hand could be raised to stay her, drove the long blade to the very haft in her swelling bosom!

"Big devil—all—I curse you! He will—avenge—"

She sunk to the stone floor, dead, with the sentence incomplete on her blood-washed lips!

When the day dawned, Spread Eagle Sam, at the head of his party, mounted on the horses once belonging to the band of the She Wolf, was ready to leave the scene of death and crime.

On a rude litter was Old Misery, looking more than ever like a skeleton, from the loss of blood, but still worth a score of dead men. Two other men were carried in the same manner. Three besides these were left behind, under a pile of stones, temporarily buried.

In the cave lay the dead outlaws. In one of the chambers rested the remains of Lena Burvenich, once the honored wife of Morris Kirkendall, more recently the "She Wolf."

At the entrance of the cave stood the man whom Spread Eagle Sam saved from the knife, as guard over the dead.

"Watch them, critter, ontel we come back. Ef you skip out, mind your skelp when I ketch you!" said Spread Eagle to him.

CHAPTER XXII.

HOW THE GREAT MATCH ENDED.

The first breathless transports of that reunion were over, and Morris Kirkendall was lying back on Spread Eagle Sam's bunk, his arms wound about the form of his idolized child, her face buried on his broad bosom, faint sobs feebly shaking her frame.

There was a grave, yet joyous expression on those rugged features, and the gray eyes glowed with a light far more genial and friendly than ordinary when they contemplated any other than Luada. The strong voice was a little broken, but it was rich with feeling and overflowing with gratefulness as Morris Kirkendall addressed the young man who stood before him, erect, with arms folded tightly across his swelling chest.

"Critter, you're white as they make 'em! I've treated you like a brute, but you've turned good fer evil. I ax your pardon, humbly, sincerely, from the bottom o' my heart, an' with the lesson you've taught me, I hope to live the rest o' my days more like a human than a dumb brute critter."

He held out his right hand as he uttered the last words, but Laughing Leo made no motion toward accepting it. Instead, he shrunk back a trifle, a look sweeping over his pale face that almost terrified the veteran as he watched it.

"Don't hold a grudge, lad," the trader muttered, his voice quavering. "Don't lay up the thoughtless words an' acts of a bull-headed ejot ag'in' him too powerful deep! Kin I say more than that I'm sorry fer what's gone afore? That I'll try an' do better fer the time to come? Shake han's, boy, an' let the ole man feel he's begun to pay you off fer savin' this precious Beauty-bird from them wuss then hellions!"

"Of whom I am the worst, Morris Kirkendall!" suddenly cried Laughing Leo, his voice hard and harsh. "Man, can't you see through the thin disguise, even now? Can't you see that I carry the face of the she wolf, as you delight to call her? Can't you see that no one has a better right? For I am the son of Lena Burvenich, once your wife!"

Morris Kirkendall stared at the vehement speaker with eyes that seemed about to pop from their sockets, his under jaw falling, his face growing ghastly pale. He seemed like one suddenly stricken helpless with the finger of paralysis.

Not so Luada Kirkendall. She lifted her head and gazed into that pale face, so hard-set, so handsome, yet so repulsive just now, with that reckless, bitter light in the big blue eyes.

"Leo Laughlin, as you hope for mercy in the time to come, speak naught but the truth now! Are you the son of that terrible creature? Then who is Jesse Purchass?"

"Fortune's favorite, as I am her football," Laughing Leo replied, with a trace of his old cool mockery. "One who has robbed me of a wife, but who shall no longer claim my mother. In brief, Miss Kirkendall, Jesse Purchass is your lover, your beloved, an honest man if a trifle hot-headed."

"Thank God!" murmured Luada, casting herself once more upon her father's breast, sobbing hysterically; but the tears were born of joy, pure and undefiled.

"Her boy—you?" huskily muttered Morris Kirkendall, in a measure recovering from the stunning revelation. "It cain't be! Why, you brung my Beauty-bird back to me!"

"The one just and honorable action of my whole life!" the strange being uttered, with a low, mellow laugh, that sounded like the olden Laughing Leo. "Give me due credit for it, old gentleman, for Heaven knows it was a long and bitter struggle, even up to the moment before this log palace met our eyes! One minute before, I could not say which way the scale would turn: whether Miss Kirkendall would come to you, or go further with me, to become a daughter to the She Wolf!"

"You don't mean it! I cain't b'lieve it, even yet!"

"You must believe it, man!" cried Laughing Leo, his whole manner changing, his voice growing hard and almost threatening. "Hold your tongue and listen while I tell you the whole black scheme. Listen, and don't tempt me any longer! The devil is urging his cause with sufficient persistence, without any of your aid.

"I tell you I am the son of Lena Burvenich, by her first marriage. I am the boy you saw so little of in those days, when you wood and won my mother; the Leopold Burvenich whom you swore was the finest lad that ever met your eyes. Bah! I was used to lying and false flat-tery even then!

"You know all that happened after that ill-starred marriage. I am neither defending nor excusing my mother. Whatever her failings, she loved me and I loved her.

"She told me how you abused her and drove her to wrong. She brought me up to hate the very name you bore, and when, long years afterward, she called me to her and told me how her bitter, black wrongs of the years gone by might be wiped out, I fell in with her plans readily enough.

"My own life had not been that of a saint. I was not easily abashed or frightened. I saw something new and out of the ordinary run of a life like mine in what she proposed, and jumped at the offer.

"You know how I came to you and secured a position in your business house. You know I faithfully performed the work that was given to me to do; but you don't know how merrily I laughed to myself after you had snapped and growled at me more than usual. It was jolly fun, and, only for one thing, I couldn't have asked any better sport, knowing as I did that your day of reckoning was steadily drawing near. That was your daughter.

"Our plot embraced her, of course; you know that now. But somehow the fun gradually began to grow flatter and less amusing, as time passed by and I—even I!—began to love Miss Kirkendall!"

Laughing Leo paused, stepping across to the water-pail and wetting his lips. Then he resumed, speaking rapidly:

"Never mind my hopes and fears, now. They belong to the past, and are forever buried.

"You decided to come out here, and bade me prepare to bear you company. You gave me such brief warning, that I had no time to weigh the matter in my mind, and so, acting on the impulse, I hastened to let my mother know of this new move. She at once caught at the idea, and the plot which we have since carried out, almost to complete success, was the result.

"One of your men, Dike Widgeon, was in her employ, and he promised to keep her informed of your movements and of any unexpected change of mind and destination. He did his part to perfection; I leave you to reward him as he deserves, should he ever come back to you for his pay!"

"Well, even yet I was not content. I found that while I could capture your daughter whenever I chose, I longed for even more; I wished she would come to me of her own sweet will. I wanted to win her as an honest man, rather than wear her as a rascal; but somehow I did not go to work right.

"Remember, I knew nothing of her former love affair with Jesse Purchass. I believed her heart-free and at liberty to love whom she would. I saw how she loved you. I believed that if I could gain your good opinion, if I could take your good wishes with me, she would not frown upon my suit. And if so—well, the She Wolf must wait for her revenge!

"I played my cards the best I knew how, even after Jesse Purchass demolished the air castles I built first. I felt I was his equal, even though a graceless rascal. I believed I could make your daughter happier than he could, and so it went on until the elopement.

"I could have stopped that move, either by interfering myself, or giving the alarm to you, Mr. Kirkendall; but I held my peace and let them go undisturbed. I had been bitterly stung by her undisguised hatred for me, and I felt that were I to interfere, she would believe me actuated by jealousy.

"As Heaven is my judge, I did not know what danger they were running headlong into! I did not know that my mother, growing impatient at my long delay, had resolved to press matters after her own fashion. I had not the

slightest suspicion that they had fallen into her power, until she avowed as much when she confronted you, Morris Kirkendall!

"As I listened to her, as I saw how evilly her eyes glowed, how savagely she spoke of the young lady, I for the first time began to realize how deeply love for Luada Kirkendall had permeated my whole nature! And in those terrible minutes I determined to rescue her from peril, let the costs be what they might!

"I knew that were my mother to even suspect my real intentions, she would never permit me to carry them out, while she drew the breath of life. Fiercely as she loved me, I knew she would kill me before letting her grip go, once it closed upon an enemy.

"For this reason, then, I continued to play a part. I followed her, and together we talked it over. I made her believe—bah!" with a hard, bitter laugh. "Never mind the details. I can give you the results so much more quickly.

"I pretended to rescue Miss Kirkendall, at the risk of my life. I bore her out of the cave, and then rode in this direction. To carry out the double deception, I made the She Wolf tell her that Jesse Purchass was really her son, instead of me. It was a fine farce, finely carried out!

"Then—the devil and I fought hard all the way to this place! It would be so easy to turn from the right trail—to wander through the hills until—until—"

He stopped, with a dry, hacking cough, and only resumed after a visit to the water-pail.

"Never mind. I am not posing before you as a martyr, hero or repentant villain. I am simply trying to show why I have proved a double traitor; first to you and yours, next to the mother who bore me, and the hot love that is still flaming up in the organ that serves me for a heart!

"If I had learned to love you better, Miss Kirkendall, I would have left your company the moment I began to note the wonderful truth. If I had loved you less, you would be my bride, willing or unwilling, this day! As it is—I simply say—may you be happy with the man of your love! May you never know sorrow or grief—and above all, may you never realize how terribly hard and bitter it is to bid adieu to all that the world holds precious and lovely and dear to you—to turn from the light and happiness of heaven to the rayless gloom of hell—as I am doing now!"

He turned and strode rapidly from the room, paying no attention to the calls, uttering a shrill whistle that brought his gallant black horse to his side; but before he could leap into the saddle, the sharp challenge of Spread Eagle Sam rung out menacingly on the air:

"Hold up, critter! We'll riddle ye like a sifter ef ye make so much as a move!"

A bright red spot glowed in each cheek as Laughing Leo saw the hide-hunters with their rifles covering him. The red spots died out and left his face colorless as snow, when he saw Jesse Purchass, free and unbound, sitting a horse in the midst of his friends. A vivid flame shot into his eyes as he stepped from behind his horse and strode toward them, unheeding the repeated warning which Spread Eagle Sam growled:

"Back, ye bull-headed critter! D'y want us to plug ye?"

"You are here, Jesse Purchass! How did you escape? How did you leave her—my mother?"

"Where is she—where is Miss Kirkendall, dog?" grated the young hide-hunter, leaping to the ground, only to be caught and held impotent by Spread Eagle Sam.

There was no necessity for Laughing Leo to reply. Luada heard and recognized the voice of the man she loved, and rushing from the dugout, she flung herself into his arms.

With a dry, choking laugh, Spread Eagle Sam stepped aside. He knew that Jesse Purchass would not soon bethink himself of his rival or his weapons.

And then, tottering, scarcely able to stand without support, Morris Kirkendall came to the door, crying, huskily:

"Tetch him, an' I'll shoot even you, Sam! He brung Beauty-bird back—he's white as they make 'em, ef he is that cussed she wolf's cub!"

Laughing Leo touched the herculean hide-hunter on the arm, his voice hard and metallic:

"Where is she? You did not get him away from her without a fight. What did you do to her?"

Spread Eagle Sam hesitated a moment, but it was not through personal fear. He had learned to both love and respect this strange young man, rivals though they had been, and it was hard to utter the words that must be uttered.

"You're right, lad. Thar was a fight. An' she was killed," he uttered, slowly.

"Who killed her? Not you? Tell me his name, or I'll have to count the innocent among the guilty. Who killed her?"

"She killed herself, lad," gravely. "I don't ax you to take our word fer it. Thar was one man o' the gang that I saved the life of. He's back thar at the cave, keepin' guard over the dead, so the coyotes won't git at 'em afore we kin go back to give 'em Christian burial. Go ax him. He saw it all."

"I will go. If you speak true, good-by, forever! If you are deceiving me—I will see you later!"

Laughing Leo strode back to his horse, leaped into the saddle and galloped swiftly away. From that day he passed out of their lives forever!

It was nearly a week before Morris Kirkendall was able to travel, even in the spring-wagon; but then, as the long spell of good weather showed signs of coming to an end, he dared linger no longer with the hide-hunters.

The hide-hunters bore him company for two days; then the parting came. Gravely, soberly, Jesse Purchass shook his hand, and when the grim old trader stared at him in open-eyed astonishment, he shook his head, smiling faintly:

"I am going back with the boys, Mr. Kirkendall."

"Goin' back—but what'll Beauty-bird say?"

"That whatever Jesse does, is best," that little lady loyally declared, through her half-tears, half-smiles.

"Yes; she thinks with me in this, dear sir," soberly added Purchass. "She thinks it best for me to carry out my original plans, and come for her when I can show you the record you demanded. Then, when I have proven myself a man whom even you will not be ashamed to take by the hand, Morris Kirkendall, I will ask you to give me your choicest treasure—Luada!"

"Waal, now I will be durned!"

"Wasn't it? Waal, I should re-mark! The way-uppest time I ever did see—an' I ain't no chicken, nuther! Ef she didn't look fit fer eatin', I don't want a cent! An' ef the boy didn't look like he wanted no better grub then that same, you kin call me a liar! An' the boss! To see that pesky ole one-legged critter hoppin', 'round the room, swingin' every gal an' woman he could ketch hold of! An' huggin' an' bussin' of 'em behind the doors, in the corners, out in the middle o' the room—it was all one to him, the onchristian sinner! An' Ole Misery! Now you be talkin', critter! Why don't you think—that he was, in one corner o' the eatin'-room, his lap piled up to his chin with grub an', drink an' all sech; an' 'twixt each swaller an', each mouthful, the durned critter'd whine out somethin' 'bout ef he was on'y back in good ole Mizzouri!

"An' thar was Kanuck, dressed out in tip-top style, buckskins an' all, slingin' out his cussed Frenchy talk an' cavortin' 'mongst the gay heifers like a king bull on the range!

"An' Johnny Bull got so full up to the chin that he wanted to fight the boss hisself, an' only let up when the ole man punched him under the table with that wooden peg o' his'n!

"An' me? Waal, I was thar, or tharabouts, stranger! An' mebbe ye won't b'lieve it, but the little lady-bird stuck to this ole critter on tel he said he'd stan' up to them when the Gospel-sharp was doin' the weddin' business, an' see that the boy didn't git skeered an' run from the music. An' I did, too! An' they's them that was thar as'll tell ye Spread Eagle Sam got away with the fu'st kiss, too! She done it, mostly, jes' fer a joke, I reckon; but Sam got thar, now I tell ye!"

THE END.

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